

PART ONE

READING AS *SPONSA ET MATER*

Chapter I

MUTATIONS OF THE READING WOMAN

Pucele and Sinnec wîp

In Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*, the protagonist of the same name is twice placed in the position of watching women "read," once in advance of his path through *aventure* and once near its conclusion. In the first scene, he voyeuristically observes Laudine's desperation as she prays from a psalter while mourning the loss of her husband, killed by Yvain.¹ The second occurs as part of the *Pesme Aventure*, the "most dire adventure," which is Yvain's penultimate trial and the last he accomplishes before returning to the Arthurian court. Here he becomes a third spectator and listener among a private group, a nobleman and his wife who, relaxing in their garden, "take great pleasure" (*mout esjoïr*) in "seeing and hearing" (*veoir et oïr*) their only daughter read from a vernacular text (*lisoit une pucele devant li / En un rommans*; cf. lines 5356–69). And well they should, for, as the narrator elaborates in an aside to his own audience, the reading girl is so "beautiful and noble" that the god of love, witnessing the same, would descend to earth in human form to claim and keep her for none but himself:

Et s'estoit si bele et si gente
Qu'en li servir meist s'entente
Li Dix d'amours, s'i le veïst;
Ne ja amer ne la feïst
Autrui, s'a lui meïsmes non.
Pour li servir devenist hom,
S'issist de sa deïté hors
Et ferist lui meïsme el cors
Du dart dont le plaie ne saine
Se desloiaus mires n'i paine.
(lines 5371–80)

(And she was so beautiful and so gracious that the god of love himself would have desired to serve her; had he seen her, and would have had her love no man if not himself. To serve her he would have changed himself into a man, would have given up his divinity and wounded his own body with the arrow whose wound does not heal unless a faithless doctor tend to it.)

Yvain is smitten with much the same desire—but not on seeing the eminently eligible courtly bride, the *pucele* of the *Pesme Aventure*. Yvain is inflicted with the wound of love while watching the suffering reading, the grieving devotion of his victim, Laudine:²

¹ *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Hult, lines 1410ff. Further references to this edition are parenthetical.

² The description of Yvain's wound shows striking similarity to the later passage. See lines 1367–81.

Et Mesire Yvains est encor
 A le fenestre ou il l'esgarde;
 Et quant il plus s'en donne garde,
 Plus l'aime et plus li abelist.
 Che qu'ele pleure et qu'ele list
 Vausist qu'ele laissié eüst,
 Et qu'a li parler li pleüst.
 En chest voloir l'a Amour mis,
 Qui a la fenestre l'a pris.

(lines 1420–28)³

(And my Lord Yvain is once again at the window where he beholds her, and the more he beholds her, the more he loves her and the more he is delighted, that she weeps and that she reads, these he wishes she would leave off and that it would please her to speak to him. Love had put him in this state, who befell him at the window.)

There, indulging his desire by spying through a window, he conceives an illicit love that launches his narrative path, while here, at its end, he refuses a bride legitimately won and all but forced upon him.⁴ The narrative is constructed such that it displays this latter—an ironic inversion of the desire that structures the most basic narrative units of romance—as the appropriate response, even as it serves to demonstrate the depth of Yvain's own “wound” and his fidelity to and worthiness of Laudine and thus signals the *reformatio* of his initial illicit desire. But both are represented as responses to reading women.

For “Chrétien's male heroes, ... nothing, it would seem, is more overpowering to a knight than the spectacle of a woman reading a well-wrought text.” Thus Eugene Vance observed of Yvain's observation of Laudine.⁵ To refer to Laudine's action—performed while also wringing her hands, beating her palms together, and apparently even attempting to strangle herself (lines 1416–18)—as reading may appear as ill-seeming as the unbridled desire it kindles in Yvain, but there are two reasons for doing so. First, images of psalter-reading women have long been the star witnesses to an idea that women could and did read not only as Laudine does, not only as the *pucele* does, “prelecting” a vernacular text,⁶ but also as some hybrid of the two: enjoying vernacular texts as they read psalters; that is, “in private,” or unto and for themselves. Laudine's reading would then correspond historically to a variety of female literacy that led, so the argument goes, directly to the composition of vernacular romances such as Chrétien's.⁷

³ This passage, its punctuation and translation are discussed in chap. 8, pp. 358–60.

⁴ The continuation of this episode sees, as it must, Yvain accomplishing the *aventure* associated with this castle and thus winning the bride for whose hand it was the precondition.

⁵ *Topic to Tale*, p. 7.

⁶ Joyce Coleman introduces the term, “prelection,” borrowed from John of Salisbury, to describe the medieval practice of public reading for a listening audience (Coleman, *Public Reading*, pp. 35, 230, and *passim*).

⁷ See below, pp. 24–27.

But more revealing and less disputable is another association: Laudine's action is placed in an analogous position not only, through Yvain, to the *pucele's* reading but also—through the “reading” of the audience in parallel position to Yvain—to the narrator's performance of the text. The narrator continues his aside on the god of love by casting his own performance (or reading as illustrated by the *pucele*) as the potential cure for love's wound, in which case the interested parties, whether wounded or not, are his own audience:

N'est droiz que nus pener i puisse
 jusque deslëauté i truisse,
 et qui an garist autremant
 il n'ainme mie lëaumant;
 de ces plaies molt vos deïsse
 tant qu'a une fin an venisse
 se l'estoire bien vos plëüst;
 mes tost deïst, tel i eüst,
 que je vos parlasse de songe,
 que la genz n'est mes amoronge
 ne n'ainment mes, si con il suelent,
 que nes oïr parler n'an vuelent.⁸

(It is not right that anyone take pains to cure it unless faithlessness be found there, and he who recovers from it otherwise does not faithfully love. I would gladly tell you more of this wound until I reached an end of it, if the story should well please you; but no sooner would I start than someone among you would say that I speak of mere dreams. There are no more true lovers; people no longer love as they once did, for they don't even want to hear of it anymore.)

Those who still truly love, the desired audience, would suffer the same wound and hear him out. But this allows Laudine's devotional reading, the *pucele's* reading performance, and the performance of the narrator's text to overlap in one “reading” experience. The audience is placed in an analogous position to both Yvain—with whom they, too, spied on Laudine—and the god of love: all of them “read” the reading woman, and the love, or wound, thereby inflicted has no cure other than the completion of the story, Yvain's narrative adventure. Yvain's wounding at the sight of a woman's suffering and the narrative trajectory it initiates—one that also leads, in some sense, from a woman's devotional reading to the performance of vernacular texts—are the audience's as well. Chrétien's reading women are inseparable from an articulation of the experience of romance narrative, the poetics of the performance of the narrator's text.

In another passage frequently cited as evidence that women are anticipated as the “literal” readers of romance, Wolfram von Eschenbach interrupts the narration of his

⁸ *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Roques, lines 5379–90. On my preference for Guiot's copy of this passage (I have elsewhere relied on the edition of David Hult), see below, p. 351 note 69.

Parzival at the conclusion of the sixth book and calls upon the women in his audience to judge for themselves how well he has represented their fictional counterparts:

nu weiz ich, swelch sinnec wîp,
 ob si hât getriwen lîp,
 diu diz mære geschriben siht,
 daz si mir mit wârheit giht,
 ich kunde wîben sprechen baz
 denne als ich sanc gein einer maz.⁹

(Now, I know, whatever woman of sensitive understanding—be she but of mind and body true—who should see this tale in writing, she will vouch for me in all truth that I’ve given a better account of women here than in the songs I sang of one.)

The narrator’s proud stance is based on the claim that he has fulfilled a promise—made to the same women in an excursus some 3,500 lines earlier—to deliver a new and truer portrayal of women with his poem.¹⁰ Here he invites them, it seems, to “see for themselves” what he has presented in his favour—portraits of bereft and suffering women that have peopled the poem to this point. And to jog their memories he recapitulates them: the beautiful Belakane, thoughtlessly abandoned by her much beloved foreign husband; Herzeloide, left a young and pregnant widow after an even shorter marriage to the same husband; Ginover, mourning the loss of her murdered kinsman; Jeschute, mistreated by an intruder and then mercilessly punished by her jealous lover; and Cunneware, pummelled black and blue merely for laughing. Are the women “who see the tale in writing” to be seen as readers called upon to reconsider what they have read, or are they instead listeners who verify a claim to the effect of the performed text? The promise in question would require the latter: the point at which the narrator engaged himself to accomplish the task is the same one at which he makes his famous claim to illiteracy, says his “right” as narrator can be “seen and heard,” and refuses to continue his tale for any who would “take it for a book.”¹¹ There, launching his “new” narrative with the birth of the hero, *Parzival* (4,9; 112,9–12), he likewise announces it as his own knightly service to a suffering woman: “der lobes kemphe wil ich sîn, mir ist von herzen leit ir pîn” (I’ll be the fighting champion of her praise; her grief is my heart’s sorrow) (115,3–4). This profession of “militant illiteracy” may well be a literary pose, but the claims it stakes, as we shall see in a later chapter, are anything but tongue-in-cheek.¹² Here it is most notable that they are put forward with the pose and the language of a legal transaction.

⁹ *Parzival. Studienausgabe*, ed. Lachmann, lines 337,1–6. Further references to this edition are parenthetical. Translations of the text, unless otherwise noted, are my own, for which I have consulted and compared those of Hatto, Spiewok and Kühn in addition to Knecht’s in the *Studienausgabe*.

¹⁰ A contrast is intended with the Minnesang, recalling polemic from the earlier passage, lines 114,5–116,3.

¹¹ Cf. 115,8–9, 25–26; also pp. 319–20, below.

¹² The term “militanter Illiterat” was coined by Bumke in *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, p. 6.

As the earlier passage makes clear, the women evoked as addressees in either case are the figments of a fictional, or “original,” performance of the text. They are conjured at several points in the text as audience members to whom Wolfram directs pointed remarks on the legitimacy of his narration and its relationship to truth.¹³ It would be singularly inconsistent then, at the later juncture, to figure the same women as readers; it would be a glaring contradiction, should the renewed “contract” for continuation of the story depend on its being a book, and not only this but also on book-reception to guarantee its claim to truth.

The resolution of these seeming contradictions can be found in two aspects of the contemporary meaning and experience of written text and the use of books. First, whether between books 2 and 3 or at the end of book 6, Wolfram’s challenge turns around seeing as believing or witnessing; in fact, it need not be taken as reading in the second case at all. Studying the process whereby written documents began to assume a role within traditionally oral legal practice, Michael Clanchy finds that documents of a legal transaction initially filled the same function as did objects that symbolized its completion, typically a knife or turf from the parcel of land exchanged. “Witnesses ‘heard’ the donor utter the words of the grant and ‘saw’ him make the transfer by a symbolic object.”¹⁴ This audio-visual witnessing made the transaction a manifest reality. As charters came to replace the exchanged object, they also became the visual (and audible) manifestation of truth: Clanchy cites a number of charters that preserve in writing the call to witnesses to see and hear the transaction, in effect extending the act of witnessing through time and space.¹⁵ The act of visually displaying a charter—at times on the church altar—then served to authenticate the validity of a transaction. The viewer became as if a witness of the original transaction by viewing the charter that was its record. Seeing, then, may or may not be reading. Seeing is believing and, called upon in this way, signals an appeal to pre-literate conceptions of juridically empowered communication predicated on physical presence.¹⁶ Rather than reflecting an expectation that women could or would read his text, then, Wolfram’s remark makes the women in his audience into the decisive witnesses to the truth of his narrating performance.

The second point is suggested by Wolfram’s appeal to the women’s memory of the suffering of their fellows in the narrative. This gesture evokes an act of visual *memoria*, an association between participation in a performance, visual perusal of its script, and the remembering or recalling to presence of the speech and actions of others. This is the

13 These passages, which also include the prologue, 2,23–3,24, and the epilogue, 827,25–30, are necessarily among the most disputed in the text and are treated in detail in chap. 7, below.

14 *Memory*, p. 256.

15 *Memory*, pp. 255–62, see also Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, pp. 356–65, and the literature cited there; Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 308–9.

16 Clanchy, *Memory*, p. 259; also Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, pp. 48, 59. Green, *Medieval Listening*, p. 141, argues that *geschriben sehen* was used to mean ‘read’ by recalling examples in which Wolfram and his contemporaries use the phrase to speak of consultation of a written source. These examples as easily prove my point: the gesture is again one of visual witnessing, in which a text source now stands in for the authority of the author as eyewitness.

basic relationship of medieval devotional reading to the performance of the mass. As Horst Wenzel observes, “Script, image and sculpted figure are understood in the Middle Ages as memorials serving the re-presentation, the recall to presence of persons in their speech and actions, and their significance in the court sphere resided in this function even as it did in the sphere of the Church.”¹⁷ We encounter this mirroring of the culture of *memoria* between the courtly and religious spheres specifically described as reading practice in a passage from the prologue to the Life of Saint Margaret of Scotland. The life of Margaret was commissioned by Matilda, her daughter, during her reign as queen of England (1100–1118) and is dated between 1104 and 1107.¹⁸ Margaret’s exemplary devotional reading and its effect on her husband will be discussed below. It had an effect on her daughter as well—herself a *litterata* of some renown.¹⁹ As Lois Huneycutt convincingly argues, the *vita* was not composed as hagiography so much as it was “a didactic tool for Matilda, to instil in her an ideal of queenly behaviour, and to provide a pattern which she could follow in her daily activities.”²⁰ Either way, however, the reading practice was the same. This is what the author has to say about Matilda’s reasons for commissioning her mother’s *vita*:

Venerandae memoriae matris vestrae placitam Deo conversationem, quam consona multorum laude saepius praedicari audieratis, ut litteris traditam vobis offerem et postulando jussistis et jubendo postulastis. ... Vobis congratulor, quae [i.e. Matilda] a Rege Angelorum constituta Regina Anglorum, vitam matris Reginae ... non solum audire, sed etiam litteris impressam desideratis jugiter inspicere; ut quae faciem matris parum noveratis, virtutem ejus notitiam plenius habeatis.²¹

(You have both entreated and commanded me to offer you, committed to writing, that way of life, pleasing to God, of the revered memory of your mother that you have so often heard publicly and unanimously praised. ... I congratulate you, who, made queen of the English by the king of the English, had desired not only to listen to the life of your mother the queen but also to inspect its impression in letters continually; so that, having too little known your mother’s face, you might have ample experience of her virtue.)

As envisioned by the text, Matilda’s “reading” is an ancillary, additional act to that of hearing the same content recited (*non solum audire*), evoked with a conspicuous circumlocution, *litteris impressam inspicere*. Matilda is to contemplate visually the memory of her mother, the *impressam*, “in the letters,” a practice that serves to compensate for her too brief acquaintance with her mother’s face. The auditory and visual “impresses” are thus complementary ways for Matilda to recall her mother’s presence and “know” her virtue—just as Wolfram’s female audience is called upon to recall to memory the

¹⁷ Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, p. 323: “Schrift, Bild und Figur gelten im Mittelalter als Denkmäler der Vergegenwärtigung, als Memorialfiguren sprechender und handelnder Personen, und in dieser Funktion sind sie für den Raum des Hofes ebenso wie für den Raum der Kirche wirksam geworden.”

¹⁸ Huneycutt, “Perfect Princess,” 81–97; on its significance for women’s literacy and devotional reading see Gameson, “Gospels of Margaret,” pp. 149–71.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Literacy of the Laity*, p. 171; Bumke, *Mäzene*, pp. 234–35.

²⁰ Huneycutt, “Perfect Princess,” 88–89.

²¹ *Vita S. Margaritae* 2, 328 B–C.

experience of his female protagonists, an experience they encounter in the performance of the text.²² If this experience was “true,” the way Margaret’s life is a true exemplum of Christian virtue, then this will be verified in the women’s response, in their act of *memoria* performed by contemplating the vestiges of those “lives” on the written page, the script. Image, performance, and script all serve one purpose; all are vestiges of the absent life. As we shall see over and over again, women (or the woman) represent human memory in the experience of image and word as this recalled presence.

For the authors of these texts and their audiences, the act of perusing letters on a page was, first and necessarily, one of contemplating a visual representation of sounds and presence.²³ Whether and to what extent it involved the decoding of script as language is seldom a point of interest. Matilda was certainly capable of reading her mother’s life, but, as the biographer tells us, her father Malcolm of Scotland was just as decidedly incapable of the same.²⁴ And yet (as we shall see) his love of his wife, Margaret, moves him, too, to listen to and to similarly contemplate (*inspicere*) and leaf through the pages of her books.²⁵ What counts is exactly what both texts say: seeing, looking at, inspecting the letters painted on the page. In either case, the reading involved is not the site of primary contact with the content, and such is not its object. The object is meditation and *memoria*, and it relies on an idea of reading as commonly practised by women with prayer books.²⁶

This type of “memorial reading,” which would see the written recording as a sort of relic of the performance, offers an explanation for the luxury copies of medieval romances that begin to appear in the second quarter of the thirteenth century; that is, no earlier than one or two generations after the arrival of the texts themselves. For the preceding period we possess only the most modest and functional working copies, and this in only the rarest cases.²⁷ Such memorial reading copies testify, I would argue, more

22 As Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, p. 330, writes, “Die Buchstaben gelten primär als materielle Repräsentanten der Sprache, sekundär—über die Sprache—als Repräsentanten von Dingen und Personen, auch und gerade wenn dieselben nicht anwesend sind.”

23 This act could include touch, a haptic experience of letters and pictures on the page as a kind of secondary material presence. See Borland, “Unruly Reading”; Kay, “Original Skin”; and Rudy, “Kissing Images.” On the one hand, such should not be overemphasized, as pictorial evidence of reading practice reveals striking care and respect in the handling of prayer books in particular, and a manuscript such as the St Albans Psalter (see chapter 4) could never have been preserved such as it is, had its users regularly stroked its images or letters (its paintings, for instance, were originally covered by silk screens sewn in to protect them). On the other hand, touch—as the affirmation of complete physical proximity—would constitute the ultimate object of religious reading, which seeks to conjure presence. It is in this latter sense that touch is relevant to my inquiry.

24 “ille [Malcolm], ignarus licet litterarum” (*Vita S. Margaritae* 2, 330C).

25 The effect of this vicarious reading is not left in doubt: “Fateor, magnum misericordiae Dei mirabar miraculum, cum viderem interdum tantam orandi regis intentionem, tantam inter orandum in pectore viri saecularis compunctionem” (*Vita S. Margaritae* 2, 330C). On the rest of the passage, see below, pp. 34–35.

26 Green, *Women Readers*, pp. 61–63.

27 As reviewed in detail by Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 72–87, 316–21.

to the power of the experience in performance than to a desire to read rather than to witness that experience. The layout, in particular of illustrative material, in these new manuscripts shows striking parallels to luxury psalters designed for high-ranking nobles, most prominently women, the production of which increases markedly around 1200.²⁸ The psalters, too, had a highly representational function coupled with an aura bordering on the numinous, which resided in their capacity to render the experience of the monastic office as something akin to a personal possession.²⁹ This idea does not at all exclude the literate use of the codices by their owners; it shows, however, that neither their value nor their use depended on such skills.

Finally, then, Wolfram's stylization of this memorial response as a way of guaranteeing the veracity of his text, its true-to-lifeness, suggests in itself that not women's literacy but their response to performance is what is held up and acknowledged as characteristic of romance and even made imperative to its genesis and meaning. The ploy relies on audience acknowledgement of such a female response as typical and also exemplary for the audience as a whole. Women were the representative practitioners of the use of books as sites of *memoria*, the relics of an experience of presence, a "witnessing" of the spoken word to which reading was an ancillary act performed after the fact. The response envisioned suggests a sort of symbiosis between the experience of liturgy and literature that revolves around women as representative viewers and listeners—and "readers," if this last term is understood to apply as much to the illiterate Malcolm as to the literate Matilda.³⁰

The narrator of Wolfram's *Parzival* plays throughout the poem on the idea of his performance as a "ride." He is himself a knight-protagonist whose adventures the audience follows, just as narrator and audience equally observe and follow the adventures of Parzival. When this narrator launches his performance as the champion of the suffering widow, Herzeloide, when he interrupts the story once again to insist that his promise to portray women in her image is at least partially fulfilled, he is not speaking to women alone: the narrator models a path of proper orientation to images of women's suffering that is offered to his audience as a whole and possibly to men in particular. The same path, the same task is also Parzival's: his oblivious childishness deals the final blow to his mother's, Herzeloide's, suffering heart; he is the blundering ignorant who manhandles Jeschute; with an ignominious spear-throw he kills "the flower of chivalry," Ginover's kinsman, Ither; even Cunnewære laughs only for his sake. The women both inside and outside the story have crucial, authenticating roles to play in this poetic construct, but they do not represent new readers, nor are they its only or even its primary audience. The "reading" they represent, it seems, models something that is essential to the constitution of meaning in the performance, just as in Chrétien's *Yvain*.

28 Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 91–100; Wolf, "Psalter," pp. 165–66; see also Clanchy, "Images of Ladies"; and Vitz, *Orality and Performance*, pp. 114–15.

29 Lentjes, "Psalter," p. 335; see also below, pp. 32–33, 35

30 Katharina Mertens Fleury argues that *Parzival* and the luxury psalters created for Sophia, the wife of Wolfram's patron, Hermann of Thüringen, had a complementary function in instilling *compassion* as a religious ideal in their audience and readers: Mertens Fleury, *Leiden lesen*, pp. 80–83 and *passim*.

Parzival's path, too, is punctuated by the appearances of a psalter-reading woman. The mourning and remorse of his cousin, Sigune, another bride bereaved, are made into a counterpoint and even a parallel apotheosis to his search for the Grail. She reads in only one of these appearances because her devotional use of a book is only one image, one attribute, of the larger idea she represents both for the male observer and for Wolfram's poetic project.³¹ The same is true of Laudine: Yvain observes her desperation and grief in three distinct situations, and only the last—though crucial one—shows her reading from a psalter.³² What is primarily portrayed is her grief and devotion as such, into which a psalter, a book, has been incongruously inserted. The book functions to assimilate Christian devotion to secular grief and not to distinguish the lady for her literate skills or model the historical use of texts. Laudine's grieving reading is an image of human weakness seeking the presence of the divine, a moment in which, as in the case of the reading *pucele*, "the god of love" (or God-as-love?) might be inspired to "give up his divinity," "wound himself," and descend to earth incarnate. For the male protagonists as for the audience who "sees" through their adventures, this moment is one in which they read woman—and learn to read as women, much as Malcolm of Scotland did. That is, they manifest, in the moment of loving identification that they learn in response—the moment of identification that authenticates the truth of the performance—an authentication of meaning that is identified, as Wolfram attests, with the judgment of women as (devotional) "readers."

The complexity of the relationships evoked in these two brief accounts we cannot begin to resolve here. It is rather the task of the following chapters to trace the development of a model of the mediation of knowledge and truth (understood as "reading") that is gendered as female from its articulation in monastic sources to its implementation in early vernacular texts and thus to uncover the rhetorical building blocks that serve its construction and manipulation. I have introduced these examples in this suggestive and unresolved way to make a point: their complexity points far beyond the factual representation of a relationship between women's literacy and the historical use of written texts. They have something to communicate that lies quite outside the boundaries of such documentary interest and requires a different approach entirely to the relationship between women and reading than has prevailed to date.

Readers and Representations

To a great extent, Herbert Grundmann's argument on "Women and Literature in the Middle Ages" is a reverse extrapolation of phenomena that can be much more readily historically documented for religious literature from the later thirteenth century onwards.³³ In other work, Grundmann used his unmatched acquaintance with the

31 In Parzival's third encounter with her (cf. lines 435,23–25; 437,20–21; 438,1).

32 Lines 1144ff, 1286ff. The text makes clear that it is the sight of Laudine's tearful psalter prayer that finally strikes him with love's wound.

33 "Die Frauen und die Literatur im Mittelalter"; see pp. 5–8, above.

literature of religious reform from the early to the late Middle Ages to show that the emergence of vernacular religious texts in the later period is persistently associated with religious women.³⁴ And in this period vernacular devotional literacy indeed became widespread among the laity and led, increasingly, to a “personal” perusal of vernacular texts alongside the continuing practice of prelection; that is, women’s use of vernacular texts in the religious life served a facilitating and even exemplary role in the introduction of such texts as lay reading material.³⁵ But these later developments are not part of an inexorable march of literacy that has its beginnings in the vernacular texts of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. They may well be in part a later manifestation of the equivalence between the “reading” of monastic women and that of laymen, which is a persistently recurrent feature of medieval cultural representation.

Whatever their level of literacy, there is no evidence that women (or anyone else) in the later twelfth century desired to read rather than to see and hear vernacular texts performed.³⁶ In fact, excluding Chrétien’s reading *pucele* and Wolfram’s address to women who may “see” his performance “in writing,” there are very few passages in Old French and Middle High German literature of the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries that might be seen to envision lay men or women as the readers or even prelectors of this new written vernacular poetry.³⁷ But both *Yvain* and *Parzival* display the connection between reading women and their prospective audience quite differently: as an analogy embedded in the narrative structure and manifest in the performance of texts. My argument is that these mutations of the reading woman are essential to a new poetics of vernacular writing, that is, to the way these authors communicated with their audience on the value, function, and meaning of the scripted, vernacular performance. In this function, the woman-as-reader serves not to portray literate subjects but rather as the mirror of a layman’s gnosis and the embodiment of an interface between sacred and secular reading, the clergy and the laity, and monastic and courtly ideals.

In more recent scholarship, the “evidence” for women as the special readers (and not only audience) of vernacular texts has seen itself appropriately reduced from Grundmann’s over-eager inclusion of all manner of references to women in the texts to the historical evidence of women’s use of psalters, juxtaposed with Chrétien’s reading

34 Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, pp. 452–75.

35 Now reaffirmed in Wolf, *Buch und Text*, pp. 190–99.

36 “Ausserhalb der höfischen Dichtung selbst führt die Suche nach entsprechenden Zeugnissen jedoch fast immer ins Leere. Belege fehlen, Nutzungsszenarien lassen sich kaum zuverlässig rekonstruieren” (Wolf, “*vrowen*,” 176); previously also Bumke, *Mäzene*, p. 257.

37 One of these stands out in that it claims to document real events. In the epilogue to Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Eneasroman*, the Duchess of Cleves is said to have borrowed his unfinished manuscript “ze lesine und ze schawen” (352,36); the phrase cannot be assumed, however, to mean, “to read it for herself,” *pace* Green, *Medieval Listening*, p. 164; cf. Curschmann, “Hören–Lesen–Sehen,” 243, 253–54. The private reader in Gautier d’Arras’s *Eracle*, lines 4240–44, is possibly a remonstrative exception that proves the rule; see Vitz, *Orality and Performance*, pp. 220–21. A last instance, a scene from *Wigalois* by Wirnt von Gravenberg, lines 2710–22, in which the “daughter of the King of Persia” has a beautiful maiden read to her from the story of Eneas and Dido is doubtless, like Chrétien’s reading *pucele*, a playfully idealized representation of the genre itself.

maiden or her counterpart from the German adaptation by Hartmann von Aue.³⁸ Further complicating the situation is the fact that medieval writers alternately and persistently present the woman both as book-user and as non-reader, as exemplum of lay literacy (and sometimes learning) and veritable pariah with respect to clerical learning. Both observations lead straight to the heart of the problem, because in both cases the evidence is reduced to the problem of the value of representations. As she occurs in the sources from the mid twelfth century onward, the reading woman is always potentially an ideologically loaded image. One meaning or “valence” of this image was, in fact, *illiteracy*, the incapacity to engage and process the written words on a page. Another was religious devotion. A third, and new valence of the same image that emerges in the twelfth century, is that of an alternative gnosis, a communion with God that *bypasses* letters.³⁹ This last is the focus of my argument in this chapter. It is the result of a conflation of the first two possibilities and, as such, represents a characteristic habit of medieval thought, the conjunction of opposites, *collatio contrariorum* or *discrepantis naturae coniunctio*. If the woman’s presumed incapacity for letters is collapsed into her status as a figure of lay devotion, she *signifies* the necessity of unlettered access to wisdom, a layman’s gnosis. The insistence on paradox forces recognition of a gap and thus of a necessity to redefine the terms that prohibit its negotiation.

In the remainder of this chapter and in the next I hope to illustrate, primarily through the figure of Hildegard of Bingen, the ideas that were associated with or accrued to a “female” apprehension of the Word in the twelfth century and were increasingly represented through the verbal and visual metaphor of women’s devotional reading. This woman reader thus becomes a figure through which clerico-monastic ideas of religious perfection could “translate” into laico-courtly social practices and ideals.

Reading, Gnosis, and the “Weak Sex”

Something profound and far-reaching occurs around the questions of woman, women and reading in the course of Hildegard’s long lifetime (1098–1179). The Annals of the Premonstratensian monastery Pöhlde records it as an event fixed in the year 1159, in which the divine descended into the female sex: “In these days, God showed signs of his power in the weak sex in two of his handmaids, namely, Hildegard in Rupertsberg near Bingen and Elisabeth in Schönau, whom he filled with the spirit of prophecy, and he revealed many kinds of visions to them.”⁴⁰ The year chosen by the author (for choose he did) and the idea of the two women’s revelations as (nearly) simultaneous betray manipulation to a purpose.⁴¹ Hildegard and Elisabeth are taken together to *represent*

³⁸ Hartmann von Aue, *Iwein*, lines 6455–70. Appropriately, then, the most recent research has concentrated on examining the evidence of readership in the corpus of late twelfth-century and thirteenth-century psalters: Wolf, “Psalter,” and Wolf, *Buch und Text*.

³⁹ Poor, “Mechthild,” 230–38; and Green, *Women Readers*, pp. 38–41.

⁴⁰ *Annales Palidensis*, 16:90; as translated in Clark, *Elisabeth*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Hildegard dates her visionary turning point to 1141 (though she revealed it only five or six years later); Elisabeth’s first visions are reported from 1152. See Clark, *Elisabeth*, p. 5; and Newman, “Visions,” 173–74.

the female and the weak; God's "descent" is manifest as a privilege accorded them as representatives of these human characteristics. It is curious, indeed, that a writer in the last quarter of the twelfth century could have had such uncanny knowledge of the future: Hildegard and Elisabeth are today acknowledged as the first in a long and rich tradition of women's visionary and mystical writings that comes into full flower by the mid thirteenth century. They stand on nothing less than a chronological gender divide in the history of Christian mysticism. The distribution of such experience shifted dramatically from men to women beginning at this point, and with it the nature of the experiences and the understanding of their significance.⁴² But, as Kurt Ruh described it, Hildegard and Elisabeth do not so much initiate the experience that was typical of later women mystics or of mysticism generally; rather, they initiate a paradigm of women's perception and recommunication of the divine that is of epochal significance: "the visual and auditory mediation of the *contents* of mystic vision" is for the first time effable, not only comprehensible to the receiving subject, but recommunicable through her. This subject is "unlearned" and female.⁴³

As I will discuss further in [chapter 3](#), Hildegard's and Elisabeth's voices emerge within a broad contemporary context of interest in and literary activity around women's religious lives that brings into high relief the question of women's relationship to scripture, their apprehension of the Word. Through the figure of Hildegard in particular we can observe the way gendered categories are brought into play in the authentication of an alternative "reading," that is, an alternative gnosis, and the way this latter is then reassimilated to the categories themselves. This process exhibits at the same time clear points of intersection with the articulation of a female path to knowledge within the commentary on the Song of Songs, such that Hildegard's visionary experience and prophetic knowledge *could be received as* an avatar of Mary's experience, or the idea of reading the Song of Songs as one woman, the woman who is *sponsa*, did before her. The latter point is the subject of the next chapter. Here, by examining the way Hildegard positioned herself with respect to reading, in particular to psalter-reading, and the way this position translated into a commonplace of medieval thought, I wish to illustrate a process by which all these ideas become part of the copiousness that could be evoked ca. 1200 through the image of the psalter-reading woman.

But first, what was psalter literacy? What did it entail and enable the "reader" to accomplish? Primarily the recitation of texts from memory, the repetition for purposes of personal devotion of a set canon of prayers.⁴⁴ The practice of learning to read these texts was one and the same as the practice of memorizing them; it was not training in the cognitive processing of writing for its own sake. The written text was used as much or more to cue pronunciation; vocalization of the words served the mnemonic process, which was regarded, always, as operating through the ear and the mouth as well

⁴² Dinzelbacher, *Vision*, pp. 226–29.

⁴³ "Was jetzt mit Hildegard und Elisabeth und allen späteren Visionärinnen einsetzt, ist die visionäre und auditive Vermittlung der *Inhalte* der Schauung," Ruh, *Frauenmystik*, p. 68, s.a. pp. 66–67; also McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, pp. 333–37.

⁴⁴ Saenger, "Reading Habits," p. 142; also Lentjes, "Psalter," pp. 340–41.

as the eye: one ate or drank the text, masticated as one produced the sounds that the memory recorded. This form of literacy has the objective of rendering obsolete the tool of its training—the written text. In visual and verbal representations of prayer with the psalter, the open book may serve primarily to represent the content of the devotee's memory, the spoken texts that cannot be otherwise easily visualized. (Thus Laudine can “read” her psalms despite eyes full of tears and dramatic gestures of grief.) The primer of this form of recitation of texts comes to be the visible attribute that represents its successful assimilation to the person portrayed.⁴⁵ The laywoman (or, later, the layman) with her psalter *does not need to read* (in our sense) the book in front of her—if she were not understood in this way, then she would be an incomplete, a deficient exemplar of the very piety she represents. Her reading does not, in itself, imply any aspiration beyond this practice to other books and “higher learning”—it does aim beyond its book to a higher objective: the ear of God.⁴⁶

Beginning in the late twelfth century, women's psalter-reading is associated repeatedly, and by several different writers, with Hildegard's extraordinary visions, prophetic writings, and musical compositions. The conjunction between a less-than-literate reading and communication with the divine in the idea of the woman as psalter-reader explains at once why it was so useful as a *representation* of Hildegard, and why it comes to be a preferred clerical *representation* of a layman's use of books: it maintains a clear distinction between what clerics called reading, *lectio*, and a use of texts that, for whatever reason, is placed outside its bounds.

Two chroniclers, Alberich of Troisfontaines and Albert of Stade, offer nearly identical witness to the idea that Hildegard's (self-professed) rudimentary reading ability could be represented through the image of psalter-reading noblewomen:

Repente intellectum expositionis librorum, videlicet psalterium, ewangeliorum et aliorum catholicorum, tam veteris quam novi testamenti voluminum, sapiebat. Non autem interpretationem verborum textus eorum nec divisionem sillabarum nec cognitionem casuum aut temporum habebat; solum psalterium legere didicerat more nobilium puellarum a quadam inclusa in Monte sancti Desibodi.⁴⁷

(She suddenly acquired an understanding of how the scriptures should be expounded, that is, the psalter, the Gospel, and other sacred books, both of the Old and New Testaments. However, she had no understanding of the vocabulary of their texts or ability to divide syllables, or knowledge of cases and tenses; she had only learned, from a woman recluse at Disibodenberg, to read the psalter the way girls of the nobility do.)

⁴⁵ Clanchy, “Images of Ladies,” pp. 112–18, esp. 113; likewise Gameson, “Gospels of Margaret,” p. 163.

⁴⁶ The secondary literature has witnessed an over-eagerness to conflate the use of prayer books and “a hunger for learning”; for example, Schreiner, “Marienverehrung,” 332–38; Bumke, *Höfische Kultur*, p. 474; Scholz, *Hören und Lesen*, p. 207; Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners,” 754; and now Wolf, “Psalter,” and Wolf, “*Wrouen*.”

⁴⁷ Alberich of Troisfontaines, *Chronica*, 834; the translation is modified from Millett, “No Man's Land,” p. 90.

That is how Alberich put it; Albert's version says the same thing in fewer words and using the same key phrase: *psalterium [legere] more nobilium puellarum*.⁴⁸ Their interest in this phrase—and that of others who use the same phrase to characterize Hildegard's level of learning—lies in authenticating a claim to gnosis *without* letters. By playing on an assumption that women's reading inside the religious life was the equivalent of that of women outside it, they mobilize the noblewoman's reading as a convincing image of Hildegard's inability to have read scripture herself, that is, to have composed what she did without divine inspiration. A commonplace of women's "illiteracy" thus authenticates her visionary experience. Rhetorically, women's incapacity for book-learning—laywomen's "reading"—becomes a precondition for a miraculous gnosis.

One of the major arguments of this book is that the woman in this image is just as potent a sign as her psalter is. If she holds the psalter because it is the symbol of illiterate reading, it is also true that the layman's reading is represented through her because she cannot be *clericus*.⁴⁹ There is no term for female cleric, as Philip of Harvengt noted in his contemporary critique of twelfth-century usage, and while he tells us that a woman who excelled in the literate arts could be called—"improprio sermone" (improperly speaking)—a *bonus clericus*, this, too, was a rhetorically charged statement: Philip thus illustrates what he sees as the absurdity of contemporary usage, which doggedly equates *litteratus* with *clericus* and *illitteratus* with *laicus*.⁵⁰ And though he claims often to have heard this malapropism, I have found no instance in which such usage was applied. Even Heloise, whose learning was famous in her own time, is never termed *bonus clericus* (or *clerica*). Woman was necessarily non-cleric, and thus she could serve to represent non-reading, or the extra-literate use of books.

Two different poles of rhetorical association can be readily identified for the image of the psalter-reading woman in the period around 1200 and will be discussed below. The meaning of the image depends entirely on who is using it, on its rhetorical value to the idea at stake. What we observe in the articulation of Hildegard's persona is the way a contradiction in terms, or the meeting of opposed valences of one and the same figure, could be manipulated to speak new possibilities with and within orthodox terms. The extraordinary is expressed through a commonplace as a way of placing it in social memory, or assimilating it to types.⁵¹ This process could result, however, in the displacement of the commonplace towards the formerly unique, or the reassimilation of the unique to the category such that the category itself acquires new rhetorical value. To

48 Albert of Stade, *Annales Stadenses*, 330: "Haec cum quadraginta duorum esset annorum, magnae chorsationis igneum lumen aperto coelo adveniens totum cerebrum eius transfudit et totum cor et totum pectus eius, et sic eam sanctus Spiritus inflammavit, ut statim omnium catholicorum librorum seriem, tam novi quam veteris testamenti, ad integrum intelligeret, cum tamen nichil umquam didicerit, nisi solum psalterium more nobilium puellarum."

49 Duby, *Three Orders*, pp. 131–33; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 286.

50 Philip of Harvengt, *De continentia clericorum* 110, 816–17. See also Landgraf, "'clericus' im 12. Jahrhundert," 74–78.

51 Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, pp. 44–46; and Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, pp. 180–83.

overhear this process, it is essential to read the topoi as figures open to differing, but nevertheless fixed, possibilities of rhetorical inflection.

Sicut mulier legit psalterium: Women as Illiterates

The association between women and psalter-reading occurs with some frequency from the mid twelfth century to the mid thirteenth in contexts that witness its use among clerics for clerics. Used this way, the image serves a derisory intention: woman is the antipode of the cleric's self-definition through reading. The writer Saltimbene reports in his chronicle for the year 1248 a public debate between two monks, Hugh of Digne and one Peter, over Joachimite teachings. Because the latter, reported to be a "lector et litteratus homo et magnus prolocutor," had expressed his disdain for these teachings, Hugh challenged him to a debate that he began by asking whether Peter had even read Joachim's writings.⁵² Peter replied, "Legi et bene legi," to which Hugo retorted:

Credo, quod sic legisti, sicut una mulier legit Psalterium, que, quando est in fine, ignorat et non recordatur, quid legerit in principio. Sic multi sunt legentes et non intelligentes, vel quia contemnunt que legunt, vel quia obscuratum est insciens cor eorum.⁵³

(I believe you read it, just as a woman reads the psalter: when she reaches the end, she neither knows nor remembers what she read at the beginning. There are many who read without understanding, either out of contempt for what they read, or because their heart is obscured by foolishness.)

The woman is in neither of the last categories that Hugh mentions. These apply to those who should be able to make better use of books than they in fact do, that is, clerics who use their schooling poorly. By comparing such monks or clerics with psalter-reading women, Hugo says they might as well not read at all, or, to be more precise, they might as well use books after the fashion of illiterates.

A satiric verse from the thirteenth century captures just as vividly the way clerics used women's psalter-reading to evoke a use of books that is discontinuous with their own, this time also reflecting the existence of separate schools in which this use was learned—independently of training in *grammatica*:

Si vero grammaticam nequis scire plene,
Defectu ingenui, defectu crumene,
Horas et psalterium discas valde bene,
Scolas si necesse est puellarum tene.⁵⁴

(If you cannot fully master grammar, whether for lack of ability or lack of money, learn the canonical hours and the psalter well, and if necessary you can keep a school for girls.)

⁵² Saltimbene, *Cronica*, 239–40.

⁵³ Saltimbene, *Cronica*, 240.

⁵⁴ Rudolf Peiper, "Beiträge zur lateinischen Cato-Litteratur," as cited in Thompson, *Literacy of the Laity*, p. 115, no. 154, and described as "a thirteenth-century poem in praise of study and the clerical life." See also Ferrante, "Education," p. 12.

Both these examples post-date the identification of Hildegard as a woman who “reads the psalter in the fashion of young noblewomen.” In the only example of similar “clerical” usage known to me from the twelfth century, women’s psalter-reading is implemented in a way that comes much closer to the way it is applied to her; that is, it expresses the idea of complete contradiction between psalter literacy and knowledge of scripture, this time exploited not by God to reveal his prophetess but by the Devil to display his disdain for the church and its learning. The life of Norbert of Xanten recounts how the Devil, who has possessed a girl, demonstrates his contempt for the efforts of those who would exorcise him by reciting and then explicating the Song of Songs, first in Latin, then in German:

Tunc igitur, ut vere superbus est daemon, scientiam suam volens ostentare, Cantica canticorum, a principio usque ad finem, per os puellae edidit, et iterans verbum ex verbo, in Romanam linguam usque in finem interpretatus est; et reiterans verbum ex verbo, in Teutonico totum expressit; cum illa puella, dum adhuc sana esset, nihil nisi Psalterium didicisset.⁵⁵

(Then, as a sign of his insolent contempt, and desiring to demonstrate his knowledge, the Devil recited the Song of Songs from beginning to end through the girl’s mouth, and then commenting on the Word, he interpreted it to the end in the romance tongue, and repeating his commentary, translated it all into German; while this girl, so long as she was healthy, had learned nothing but the psalter.)

The image of sublime knowledge of scripture coming from a girl’s mouth authenticates the presence of the Devil in her body—even as it will authenticate the presence of the Spirit in Hildegard. It is an image of the impossible, an inversion of order that, here, instils horror, there, instils awe. The assumed contradiction on which it relies is manipulated in either case to force recognition of the supernatural: the Devil incarnate, the woman imbued with the Spirit. Both images represent the rhetorical manipulation of paradox, or *collatio contrariorum*.

***Litterata, deo cultrix*: Woman as Mirror of Lay Devotion**

Evidence of the layman’s perspective on women’s psalter-reading has to be collated from different sources, but it is plentiful enough. The advent of courtly ideals brought with it an image of the psalter-reading woman as an ideal of lay piety and feminine perfection. Felix Heinzer, a specialist in codicology of the High Middle Ages, writes of the psalter as no less a “signature” of courtly culture ca. 1200 than was the courtly lady herself.⁵⁶ Eleanor of Aquitaine (d. 1204), a figure who, for her contemporaries, epitomized both glory and infamy of the courtly ideal, is portrayed on her tomb (ca. 1200) at the monastery of Fontevraud holding an open book that doubtless represents a psalter (fig. 1.1).⁵⁷

55 *Vita Sancti Norberti*, 8.45, 1288B.

56 Heinzer, “Psalter,” 158; also Wolter-von dem Knesebeck, *Elisabethpsalter*, p. 84.

57 The tombs of the Plantagenets at Fontevraud are “among the first fully sculptural, life-sized effigies of contemporary or recently deceased monarchs,” and Eleanor’s is likewise the earliest of many sculpted examples of a psalter-reading woman. See Nolan, “Queen’s Choice,” pp. 377–405 at p. 382. Nevertheless, Eleanor’s open book is more likely the result of an idealizing and generalizing representation than a personal decision or a reflection of Eleanor’s personal tastes, as argued in Clanchy, “Image of Ladies,” pp. 115–18.



Figure 1.1. Tomb effigy of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Abbey of Fontevraud, France, ca. 1200.
© Abbaye Fontevraud/Anne-Sophie Asher.

In his detailed accounts of medieval courtly culture, Bumke pointed out the increasing frequency of such representations in visual art of the thirteenth century and argued generally that they monumentalize a courtly ideal.⁵⁸ Around 1200, the production of lavishly ornamented and illuminated manuscripts shifted dramatically from the Gospels to the psalter—in connection with patronage of high-ranking noblewomen.⁵⁹ The practice among the nobility of sending their daughters to monastic or other schools to learn the psalter seems to have increased to the point that by the early thirteenth century there was a shortage of available places.⁶⁰ Prayer and psalmody figured prominently in the sections dedicated to women in Vincent of Beauvais's treatise on the education of young nobles (ca. 1247), while he makes no mention whatever of vernacular literature and is clearly against introducing women to Latin learning.⁶¹

This evidence has been noted often enough. But it is neither sufficiently nor even appropriately addressed by the idea that it documents a new or expanded use of books. As noted above, women's use of psalters and other devotional works is not lacking in earlier periods.⁶² What we see in the elevation of the psalter-reading woman to a courtly ideal by the late twelfth century is the creation of a new image of lay piety. It is not simply the result of greater numbers of literate or even psalter-literate women, nor does it, in itself, imply a growing prestige of literacy; rather, the visual monumentalization, the numbers, the fetish value of the codices: *all attest to a dramatic increase in the representational value of a well-established social practice.* Just as she suddenly appears in visual

⁵⁸ Bumke, *Mäzene*, pp. 242–43; Bumke, *Höfische Kultur*, p. 474; now also Wolf, “Psalter,” pp. 145–46.

⁵⁹ Bumke, *Mäzene*, p. 161; Heinzer, “Psalter,” 158; Wolf, “Psalter,” pp. 156–57, and Wolf, “vrowen,” 176–80; also Stirnemann, “Women and Books,” pp. 247–52. The shift is so marked and the books so lavish, that Lentjes, “Psalter,” p. 335, speaks of an “Auratisierung des Codex.”

⁶⁰ Specht, *Geschichte*, p. 294; and Ferrante, “Education,” p. 12; Wolf, “Psalter,” pp. 144–45.

⁶¹ Rosemary Bartin Tobin, *Education of Women*, pp. 33, 71, 79, 90–91, 143.

⁶² See p. 6 note 23, above.

art at around this time, the psalter-reading woman “becomes an image”—or rather a mirror—during the later twelfth century.

This image can include the attribution of learning, a cleric’s grammar literacy, to particular women. But even where a woman’s more general learning gives occasion for the rare term *litterata*—denoting, no doubt, real expertise in letters—it occurs within a catalogue of her courtly perfections, cited alongside features of physical beauty, admirable comportment—and, most inseparably, devotion to God. Thus Otto Morena extolled the perfections of Beatrice of Burgundy (d. 1184), wife of Frederick Barbarossa:

Beatrix vero coniunx ipsius imperatoris fuit, et ipsa de nobili genere orta de provincia Burgundie, ... facie pulcherrima, dentibus candidis et bene compositis, erectam habens staturam, ... suavis et blandis sermonibus pudica; pulcherrimis manibus, gracilis corpore; viro suo plenissime subdita eumque timens ut dominum et diligens omnifariam ut virum; litterata, Deo cultrix; et cum Beatrix nominaretur, re vera summe beata erat.⁶³

(Beatrice, of noble descent from the province of Burgundy, was the wife of this emperor, ... with a beautiful face, teeth white and well formed, an erect stature, reserved in her pleasant and charming speech, with most beautiful hands and a graceful body; completely obedient to her husband whom she feared as her lord and loved in all ways as her husband; a learned woman, worshipping God; and just as she was called Beatrice, so truly was she blessed above all.)

Beatrice is the mirror of both the perfect wife and the perfect queen, blessed in all things, and this image culminates with her place as a devout literate: *litterata, Deo cultrix*. Her prayer serves the same representational purpose as do her beauty and courtly manners, reflecting well on her husband and modelling an ideal for her subjects. The idea of women’s learning, when it appears at all, is assimilated to their role as models of devotion, and the latter function is readily fulfilled without it.⁶⁴

The same assimilation and the role of the woman’s reading as a mirror of lay devotion are documented with remarkable poignancy in Malcolm of Scotland’s use of his wife’s books, mentioned earlier. Queen Margaret’s devout reading and learning is extolled in no uncertain terms by her biographer; she outdoes even the most learned doctors. And this had consequences “not only for her own salvation, but also for that of others, first among them the King himself.” Margaret brings Malcolm to keep even the nocturnal hours of prayer and teaches him to pray “with a sighing heart and abundant tears.”⁶⁵ The biographer then describes how Malcolm’s love of his wife, causing him “to love all that she loved,” brings him to take up her books, and, although he was “ignorant

⁶³ Otto Morena, *Historia frederici*, 167–68. Morena and the two other authors of this history were contemporaries of Frederick Barbarossa.

⁶⁴ Beatrice was also a patron, or at least the addressee, of Gautier d’Arras’s *Ille et Galéron* (1170–1184), where she is likewise extolled in the highest terms. Gautier, however, overlooks the idea of literacy entirely; see lines 2–3.

⁶⁵ “Nec in his solummodo suam, sed etiam aliorum quæsitv salutem: primoque omnium ipsum Regem, ad iustitiæ, misericordiæ, eleemosynarum, aliarumque opera virtutum, ipsa, cooperante sibi Deo, fecerat ottemperantissimum. Didicit ille ab ea etiam vigilias noctis frequenter orando producere; [et marito Regi omnis boni hortatrix erat;] didicit, ejus hortatu et exemplo, cum gemitu cordis et lacrymarum profusione Deum orare” (*Vita S Margaritæ* 2, 330C).

of letters," to inspect them and turn the pages, and even to kiss and fondle them affectionately. The account culminates in the production of a lavish codex: "Once he ordered a certain manuscript to be adorned with gold and jewels, and gave it to the queen as a token of his devotion."⁶⁶ For the biographer, Malcolm's physical affection for books is neither a misguided form of idolatry nor an aspiration to literacy but rather the means by which the benefit of his wife's reading transfers to him, by which he identifies his salvation in her devotion. It matters nothing that he cannot read the texts, the benefits of her devotion accrue to the books as its attribute, and in loving them, Malcolm loves his wife, yes, but also God and God's word. This presumably could all have occurred even had Margaret's reading itself been little more than psalter-literate. From the lay perspective, the psalter-literate woman has access to books, but the degree of this access is not at issue, only the degree of her devotion.

The remarkable concentration of evidence associating prayer with lay noblewomen in this period is characteristic of a function that other scholars have underlined: women take on a mediating position both between monastic and lay culture and between their male counterparts and the service of God.⁶⁷ Women are the "pray-ers" of lay courtly culture, just as, within the social order of "preachers, prayers, fighters," monks and nuns are those who pray for humanity as a whole. Seen from this perspective, women's use of psalters could represent a layman's aspiration to monastic intimacy with the divine, an emulation of monastic practice that singled out the backbone of the monastic office, the psalter, and made it into an attribute of the courtly noblewoman. Such representation no more reveals how literate these women were than Eleanor's effigy at Fontevraud reveals a sincere conversion to a pious monastic life. It does, however, reveal the aspirations of the lay nobility to the spiritual privileges of the monastic elite.

The recognizable social connection between women and their psalters thus serves either as a topos of *illiteracy* or as an ideal of lay devotion. Both valences of the image in effect acknowledge that this is how laymen pray, how they obtain God's ear. But in neither case is the woman's reading any indication of nascent literary ambitions, and in the clerical usage, at least, the image expresses exactly the opposite idea: there is no skill continuum between this use of books and the cleric's.

The two representations in fact belong to two entirely separate frames of reference, despite their use of one and the same figure. But they have this in common: each side is using the woman's psalter-reading as a form of self-representation, a mirror in which the respective beholders define *themselves* in relation to an ideal. While the usefulness of the image to fulfil this function can be taken as evidence neither of women's literacy nor of their illiteracy, it does begin to illuminate the frequent appearance of psalter-reading

⁶⁶ "Quæ ipsa respuerat, eadem et ipse respuere; et quæ amaverat, amore amoris illius amare. Unde et libros, in quibus ipsa vel orare consueverat, vel legere; ille, ignarus licet litterarum, sepe manuversare solebat et inspicere; et dum ad ea quis illorum esset ei carior audisset, hunc et ipse cariorem habere, deosculari, sæpius contrectare. Aliquando etiam advocato aurifice ipsum codicem auro gemmisque perornari præcepit, atque perornatum ipse Rex ad Reginam, quasi suæ devotionis indicium, referre consuevit" (*Vita S Margaritæ* 2, 330C–D).

⁶⁷ Hamburger, "Illustrated Prayer Book," p. 187.

women in literary representation in the same period, and most particularly the appearances of Laudine and Sigune as images that initiate, or accompany, a reorientation of their male “readers’” lives. Moreover, this Janus-faced relationship to the ideas of literacy and access to God displays exactly the position of the woman reader into which Hildegard would insert herself, the real woman whose miraculous gnosis proceeded without reading. This simple substitution has the effect of embodying the paradox that is already latent in the overlap between the two representations. The woman now speaks this paradox: a “reading” without letters, a knowing without learning. Rather than simply serving two separate fields of representation, the *incapacity* for reading now fuses with access to sublime knowledge. The result is an inversion of the cleric’s understanding, based nevertheless on the terms it endorses. The idea of a woman’s “illiteracy” thus potentially becomes the mirror of a layman’s *lectio*, or a different, unlearned path to the cleric’s gnosis. And precisely this Janus-faced image is what Wolfram von Eschenbach bears on the rhetorical shield he proudly displays for his female audience: the illiterate reading of women. But that is another—and not a different—story, to which I will return in due course.

Hildegard’s *Persona* and the Psalter-Literate Woman

There is a discrepancy, rarely noted, between the way Hildegard’s reading was represented by her contemporaries and the way she represented it herself. Hildegard never used the phrase *more nobilium puellarum* or the image of psalter-reading or training in reading the psalter to represent her own position. Nowhere, moreover, does she call herself *illiterata*, and only rarely does she say anything specific at all about the extent of her training in *litteris*, that is, in the ability to read the alphabet. She does make statements about the nature of her reading and compositional abilities, and these concern not literacy as we think of it but the interpretation of texts.⁶⁸ In these statements, Hildegard clearly represents her use of written texts and the Latin language as acquired without any training in the *ars grammaticae*. Her shorthand term for this is *indocta* (untaught). Thus she stated her position in 1141, when she presented it, for the first time, to the scrutiny of male spiritual authority, writing to Bernard of Clairvaux: “sed tantum scio in simplicitate legere, non in abscisione textus ... quia homo sum indocta de ulla magistratione cum exteriori materia, sed intus in anima mea sum docta” (rather I am able to read only in a simple way, I cannot analyse and interpret the text ... or I am uninstructed, without any exposure to exterior teachings, but I am instructed inwardly, in my soul).⁶⁹

In this way, Hildegard makes clear that she has no formal schooling, and thus her ability to interpret scripture and to write about its meaning must come from outside herself—without the aid of any human intermediary. Her use of the term *indocta* is

⁶⁸ On Hildegard’s positioning vis-à-vis church authority and male learning and letters, see Newman, “Visions”; and Ferrante, “Hildegard,” pp. 103–35.

⁶⁹ *Epistolarium*, p. 4.

entirely consistent with her representation of herself otherwise as a prophetess.⁷⁰ *Indoctus* was a term with a rhetorical tradition of its own, in which it generally served literate authors as a way of throwing off the mantle of literacy in favour of a claim to inspiration directly through the Spirit.⁷¹ As I will argue below, Hildegard most likely takes over this term, or the position it designates, in emulation of Rupert of Deutz, who—certainly *litteratus*, but no *doctor*—used the same idea to introduce a radically new and experiential form of scriptural exegesis. But the identity of the *indocta* could not conceal the difference between Hildegard and others—men—who had used it before her. If they were *litteratus* but composed *indoctus*, she remained *indocta* because her sex required that she could not compose in any other way.

Hildegard also foregrounds her sex in her introduction to Bernard and does so in a circumlocution that is typical of her other writing: “Ego, misera et plus quam misera in nomine femineo” (I pitiful and more than pitiful in my female person).⁷² Elsewhere, this became, in several variations, her favoured self-identification as *paupercula feminea forma* (insignificant womanly form).⁷³ Hildegard represents her relationship to both literacy and gender through linguistic displacements, terms that are no doubt intentionally defamiliarized. In this way, she occupies the cleric’s commonplace of the illiterate woman while simultaneously attempting to reshape its terms. Characteristic of this strategy is likewise the careful denial in her letter to Bernard that she receives her knowledge in the vernacular or through her “bodily eyes”—even though her most urgent concern is whether she should “speak what she has seen and heard,” “quatenus dicam quod vidi et audiui.”⁷⁴ The woman, the vernacular, and learning through the corporeal senses form a field of association from which she borrows the terms in which to articulate her persona, but she clearly wishes at the same time to escape definition through these same categories. That is, Hildegard, whose careful circumscription of her own position always aims solely to establish the authority of her prophetic voice, necessarily carved out a position that was instantly reversible into the image of the female reader, the reader who cannot read, who is, *ipso facto*—as the first witness to the reception of Hildegard’s *persona* reveals—“laica et illiterata” (a laywoman and illiterate).⁷⁵ These were the terms in which, for a Cistercian monk in the 1170s, Hildegard’s position—that of a renowned religious superior and author of voluminous Latin works—translated into recognizable categories. The same is exactly what occurs when her twelfth-century biographers and then early thirteenth-century chroniclers recast her description or rather translate it into an equivalent commonplace: that of the psalter-literate woman.

70 Newman, “Visions,” and Newman, “Hildegard-Bilder,” pp. 126–52.

71 Ohly, “Wolframs Gebet,” 6–17; and more generally, Auerbach, *Literary Language*, pp. 25–66.

72 *Epistolarium*, p. 3.

73 Others include *paupercula et imbecillis forma* (insignificant and feeble form) and *paupercula mollis forma*, with a suggestion of a feminine, fleshly softness; cf. *Liber divinorum operum*, p. 46.

74 *Epistolarium*, pp. 3, 4–5.

75 See below, p. 38.

One telling example suffices to see this process at work. One of the only other specific statements Hildegard makes on her education—as opposed to statements on the source of the knowledge she writes down—is a passage from one of the autobiographical sections of her *vita*. It follows there on the description of her visionary illumination that is lifted from the *Protestificatio* of the *Scivias*, her first work:

In eadem visione scripta prophetarum, evangeliorum et aliorum sanctorum et quorundam philosophorum sine ulla humana doctrina intellexi ac quedam ex illis exposui, cum vix notitiam litterarum haberem, sicut indocta mulier me docuerat. Sed et cantum cum melodia in laudem Dei et sanctorum absque doctrina ullius hominis protuli et cantavi, cum numquam vel neumam vel cantum aliquem didicissem.⁷⁶

(In that same [experience of] vision I understood the writings of the prophets, the Gospels, the works of other holy men, and those of certain philosophers without any human instruction, and I expounded certain things based on these, though I scarcely had literary understanding, inasmuch as an untaught woman had been my teacher. But I also composed, with their melodies, songs which I also sang in the praise of God and of the saints without the teaching of any man, although no one had ever trained me in either musical notation or voice.)

One valuable witness of this passage lies in the way it represents women's monastic learning—in this case that of recluses attached to a male monastic community. Instruction given by a woman is not “human teaching,” and the “untaught” woman can teach. Hildegard implicitly endorses an idea that women's learning follows a different trajectory than men's; it is not simply at a lesser level on the same scale but rather a different kind or mode of instruction altogether and delivers a different body of knowledge. And yet, to state this does not seem to be her interest; she appears rather to endorse the categories through her experience, not to use them to define that experience. Moreover, the details of her education receive only cryptic description; they do not serve her purpose beyond being another apodictic statement that her knowledge comes from God.

Within the same text, the final author and redactor of the *vita*, Theoderich, offers his account of the same process in a passage which he no doubt composed using Hildegard's own:

Recluditur in monte sancti Disibodi cum pia Deoque dicata femina Iutta, que illam sub humilitatis et innocentie veste diligenter instituebat et carminibus tantum Davidicis instruens in psalterio dechacordo iubilare premonstrabat. Ceterum preter psalmorum simplicem notitiam nullam litteratorie vel musice artis ab homine percepit doctrinam, quamvis eius extent scripta non pauca et quedam non exigua volumina.⁷⁷

(She was enclosed in a cell on the Disibodenberg with the pious woman Jutta, also dedicated to God, who, under the mantle of humility and innocence, diligently instructed her, teaching her enough of David's songs that she could rejoice along with the ten-stringed psalterium. Beyond this simple knowledge of the Psalms she received no human instruction in the literary or musical arts, although there exist many writings by her, among them several weighty volumes.)

⁷⁶ *Vita sanctae Hildegardis* 2.2, lines 10–17; translation taken, with my addition, from Dronke, *Women Writers*, p. 145.

⁷⁷ *Vita sanctae Hildegardis* 1.1, pp. 86–88.

The comparison could hardly be more revealing: Theoderich “translates” Hildegard’s account into one that associates her firmly with women’s devotion and psalter literacy. This training is described so as to suggest a foundation of both her exegetical and her musical compositions, the same two activities she mentioned. When one recalls the clerical understanding of reading *sicut mulier legit psalterium*, it becomes clear that this description is in fact synonymous with the one expressing the same ideas, but using different terms, by the Cistercian chronicler who had visited Hildegard in 1172:

Hoc anno vidi in Alemmanie partibus feminam provecte etatis, virginem, cui tantam gratiam contulit virtus divina, ut, *cum ipsa laica et illiterata sit*, mirabiliter tamen ab hoc mundo rapiatur frequencius et in summis discat non solum quod postea in imis dicat, sed potius, quod satis mirabile est et unauditum, etiam scribendo Latine dictet et dictando libros catholice doctrine conficiat.⁷⁸

(In this year I saw a woman of advanced age in German territory, a virgin on whom divine power has conferred such grace that, although she is an illiterate laywoman, she is miraculously taken from this world on many occasions, and not only learns in the heights what she afterward tells here below, but also—which is most wondrous and unheard of—composes writings in Latin and delivers her books thus composed to the teachings of the church.)

In his own unfinished account of Hildegard’s life, Guibert of Gembloux, her last secretary and one of her most inveterate admirers, hits upon the formula that would stick: “Indocta quippe quantum ad eruditionem artis grammaticae erat ... instar mulierum psalterium solummodo discentium simpliciter scripturas in usu habens legere, non sensus earum acumine ingenii” (She was uneducated as to learning in the art of grammar ... used to reading scripture only in the simple way of women who have learned the psalter, without their minds being sharpened to its meanings).⁷⁹

Finally, this “press-release” version of Hildegard’s relationship to reading was taken over in the first half of the thirteenth century by Alberich of Troisfontaines and Albert of Stade, who both seem to have used Hildegard’s passage from the *vita* as their source, in that both report it in the context of the description of her illumination taken from the *Scivias*. But they “translate” following Theoderich, and both using, either independently or following a predecessor unknown to us, the phrase *solum psalterium [legere] more nobilium puellarum*.

All these descriptions, whether from Hildegard or her male observers, agree on a basic idea: Hildegard’s use of books was radically discontinuous with the clerical arts. She could not have written what she did unless by divine inspiration. But the men’s descriptions accomplish something that Hildegard avoided: they reassimilate her alternative, miraculous gnosis to the commonplace, the image of the psalter-literate (or “illiterate”) woman. Hildegard’s *indocta* and *paupercula feminea forma* were novel ways of circumnavigating an equation between gender and illiteracy that was tantamount to a prohibition of women’s involvement in letters such that an outlet emerged for a woman’s voice that was not previously there—and would never again be fully stopped

⁷⁸ Pseudo-William Godellus, *Chronicon*, 198.

⁷⁹ Guibert of Gembloux, *Epistolae*, 38, p. 377.

up. This much is undeniable. But at the same time, this unique and lexically unconventional description was “packaged” for public consumption in terms of images that could be more readily and broadly understood—without, in the cases cited, any intention of diminishing Hildegard’s claim to prophetic wisdom.

Two developments are documented with unique clarity here: the clerical valence of women’s psalter-reading acquires an entirely positive articulation, even while it remains a portrayal of the illiterate use of books, and the lay valence of the same image, the woman as image of a layman’s devotion, becomes associated with an alternative gnosis. By the time Alberich and Albert can express the irrefutability of Hildegard’s divine illumination by reference not to the psalter-training of recluses, and not to women’s psalter-reading generally, but to the current ideal of young noblewomen’s education, Hildegard’s gnosis has become potentially a facet of a layman’s devotion, the devotion of those who are *laica et illiterata*, that is, of the noblewoman with her psalter.

In her own use of this new image of the illiterate woman’s wisdom, Hildegard proclaimed nothing so often and so persistently as the *means* by which it was received: *audivi et vidi*. The woman’s prophetic voice proclaims an audio-visual apprehension of the Word. In terms of the same topoi on learning and social groups that she otherwise manipulates, the emphasis on seeing and hearing is another that aligns Hildegard’s gnosis with a layman’s learning in obligatory opposition to the cleric’s reading.⁸⁰ To defamiliarize this image, Hildegard can do little more than to deny, as she did in the letter to Bernard, that she speaks of the physical senses. But the massive repetition of the verbal pair, in her treatises as in her correspondence, has the opposite effect: this sensory mode of apprehending knowledge comes to denote her prophetic authority in itself, similarly to the way the incapacity for letters becomes inseparable from her access to the divine. She sets this up already in the *Protestificatio* of the *Scivias*, where the phrase occurs no fewer than six times.⁸¹ It abounds in her letters, often as a form of address: “In vere visione hec verba vidi et audivi” is the basic formula, and she uses variations of it over and over again.⁸² The synaesthesia suggested by this phrase receives real emphasis in the more elaborate descriptions Hildegard offered of her moment of apprehension. As she described it late in life (ca. 1175) to Guibert, “Et simul video et audio ac scio, et quasi in momento hoc quod scio disco” (And I see and I hear and perceive all at the same time, and almost in the same moment as I perceive, I also learn).⁸³ A letter to Odo of Soissons from the beginning of her career (1148–1149) reveals the same understanding.⁸⁴ Hildegard redefines the idea of learning through the eyes and ears as a moment of apprehension that is not reducible into its composite sensory elements and that surpasses all knowledge delivered by means of representations. Its authority resides in an experience

⁸⁰ On the significance of the same verbal pair to designate the layman’s learning, see Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, pp. 25–37.

⁸¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, pp. 3–6.

⁸² *Epistolarium* 33, p. 90.

⁸³ *Epistolarium* 103, pp. 261–62.

⁸⁴ *Epistolarium* 39, p. 101.

of presence, of face-to-face communication, and in this sense it is inescapably “sensory” and “physical.” As I will argue in [chapter 3](#), this use of the audio-visual moment exploits an understanding of women’s religious instruction, or “reading,” that was articulated as a picture-text method in the *Speculum virginum* in the decade preceding Hildegard’s public career—a work widely used, if not also composed, in the monastic world of the middle Rhine. The same ideas take the form of an audio-visual theatre as the basis for the embodied reading life of another psalter-reading woman: Christina of Markyate.

Hildegard’s *persona*, the packaging of her identity, documents the accretion of habits of thought, commonplaces, to a historical identity; the embodiment, one could say, of an image such that its opposing rhetorical valences coexist as a historical fact. This *persona* serves my argument as a historical illustration of the mutations of the reading woman in twelfth-century discourse. Hildegard’s self-positioning situates her voice on a seam, a boundary between literate and illiterate, monastery and “world,” Latin and vernacular—and between God and humanity—in a way that offers a sensational reflection of ideas that were increasingly being associated with women’s position in lay society. All these thus become part of one image, manifest and broadly disseminated through the figure of the living woman, Hildegard. As Theoderic put it:

Igitur dum ad hunc modum bonorum operum rivis affluentibus quasi paradysi fluminibus irrigaretur non modo tota vicinia, verum etiam omnis tripartita Gallia atque Germania, confluebant ad eam undique utriusque sexus populorum examina, quibus per gratiam Dei utriusque vite affatim accomoda impendebat exhortamina.⁸⁵

(When therefore not only the entire surrounding area but also tripartite Gallia and Germany in their entirety had been irrigated with the full streams of good works as if with the rivers of Paradise, crowds of people of either sex flowed in turn from all directions to her, to whom she gave appropriate advice for every walk of life.)

Whether or not Theoderic exaggerates the numbers of visitors who sought Hildegard’s advice, he had no need to exaggerate the extent of her fame. As her extraordinary correspondence vividly demonstrates and John Van Engen has shown, word of her visionary gifts was spread abroad “on an unprecedented scale. ... Talk in cloisters, chapters, courts, marketplaces, even church councils, turned her person, story, and writings into the buzz of high-level gossip and intrigued religious interest.”⁸⁶ Letters were sought from her with a fervour otherwise reserved for the relics of a saint.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, it is not my argument that the developments I have outlined could not have occurred without Hildegard; they are by nature only the articulation of possibilities latent in the topoi she manipulates. It is the process itself that is most revealing: Hildegard’s *persona* emerges from a broader context of interest in the relationship between the gendered other and apprehension of the Word, and it accumulates or reassimilates to ideas associated with this interest because she is so readily recognizable as their embodied voice. The categories within which she carefully manoeuvres

⁸⁵ *Vita sanctae Hildegardis*, 2.4, p. 132.

⁸⁶ Van Engen, “Letters,” p. 395.

⁸⁷ Van Engen, “Letters,” p. 412.

were the building blocks of widespread activity exploring the innovative use of media in the interest, ostensibly, of reaching the receptive capacities of the reading other, that is, non-clerics, or laymen and women. The woman and the layman represent to this project just what they do to Hildegard and those who represent her: a justification for an alternative gnosis, the posited necessity of a “reading” that proceeds without the use of writing. The association of women as representative “readers” with an alternative audio-visual gnosis is one that will resurface repeatedly in the vernacular texts analysed in the later chapters of this book. This is where we discover the surprising complicity between Hildegard’s esoteric Latin treatises and the emergence of vernacular literature; this is “what happened” in the twelfth century with regard to women and reading—and not the sudden emergence of women as vernacular readers, or, for that matter, the emergence of vernacular literacy.

In the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the figure of a woman reader posing as the memory or receptive faculty of the audience is repeatedly mobilized to articulate a poetics of the vernacular text such that not reading but witnessing, not clerical learning but identification with feminine desire and suffering are meant to bring about the descent of the divine to human apprehension. This is where the mutations of the woman reader lead to the reading women of Chrétien’s *Yvain* and Wolfram’s *Parzival*. These reading women are not literary mirrors of social practices; they are rather signposts that relate the experience of the narrative (both the protagonists’ and the audience’s) to the concept “women’s reading,” situating it somewhere between a sacred and a secular performance and between the “illiterate’s” and the “literate’s” apprehension of the Word.

We are still far from resolving the complexity of these representations within their respective narratives; the point to be retained here is that a historical coincidence between the prevalence of the psalter-reading woman and the inscription of vernacular poetry has long been recognized, but the assumption that she represented book-learning rather than gnosis, that she articulates literacy rather than poetics, has itself precluded consideration of the overlap between sacred and secular ideas of what “reading” is and that the transition from Laudine to the *pucele* might imply.

Chapter 2

READING AS MARY DID

MY DISCUSSION OF the image of women engaged in devotional reading has to this point ignored the most outstanding and best-known representative of the type: the image of Mary before an open book at the Annunciation. While the concern of the previous chapter was with images of women's reading as an activity defined (in part) through exclusion from higher learning, this idea does not preclude Mary as its archetype and model. As "handmaiden of the Lord" (Luke 1:38), Mary was a figure of humility comparable to the manger in which Christ was laid in the stable in Bethlehem; in this aspect, she represented a simplicity and purity of faith that, to the medieval imagination, is pre-literate and extra-clerical. It is in this aspect of the unwitting Annunciate that we find her as a model of women's prayer. In the illumination of Books of Hours and other prayer books, beginning in the later thirteenth century, Mary's reading at the Annunciation is frequently represented as a visual model of the owner's act of prayer or use of the book in question.¹ In fact, the visual representation of Mary engaged in devout reading at the Annunciation—so familiar today that with hindsight we easily forget that it is an invention of medieval anachronism—establishes itself in Western art at a conspicuous moment, a moment that witnesses, as I will argue in this chapter, several other pivotal developments: the emergence of the psalter-reading woman as an ideal of lay piety, the meditative exploration of Mary's experience of the Passion, and the feminization of the monastic reading subject as the bride of the Song of Songs. "Mary's reading," as I will explore it here, effectively reveals the relationship between these developments as features of a larger effort in the twelfth century to redefine the relationship between the reading subject and the Word.

The persistent misunderstanding of images of women with books as indicators of literacy and learning arises essentially from a failure to replace the social and intellectual context in which reading is embedded in our world with one that is appropriate to the time and place in question. The points of intersection between texts, reading, and the lives of the lay nobility of the twelfth century were largely determined by the liturgy or religious instruction. Still, it is not the idea that literacy emerged from or was limited to religious reading that I wish to evoke but rather the idea that, though the use of letters was only one rather technical aspect of the relationship between the Christian soul and the Word, reading was the prevailing metaphor, both visual and verbal, for this larger

¹ This emulation of the Annunciate is not limited to her devout reading but rather extends to the entire experience of Mary's encounter with the angel, into which the devotee was often visually inserted. See Büttner, *Imitatio pietatis*, pp. 70–77; further, Clanchy, "Images of Ladies," 112–13; Watson, "Conceptions," 85–124; and Miles, "Annunciation as Model." I am grateful to Laura Miles for sending me the manuscript of her study, "The Origins and Development of the Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation," which has since appeared in *Speculum*; see also below, pp. 28–29 note 23.

relationship.² Reading, *legere*, signified the process by which the Word was apprehended, understood, and put into action, and in this sense it was the object of every Christian life, regardless of training in letters. It could, and necessarily did, occur through listening or viewing, through observation and imitation, far more often, in fact, than it did through the decoding of letters.³

The master task of learning in the church was the exegesis of scripture, its proper understanding and implementation, a negotiation of the hermeneutic distance between sign and signified, letter and spirit, humanity and God, and in this the learning of monks and clerics was the alchemy of human salvation.⁴ As one such monk, Rupert of Deutz, wrote in the early twelfth century, "While it is true we do not yet see the Lord face to face when we read and understand the scriptures, nevertheless, the revelation of the divine, that is one day to be entirely fulfilled, begins here below in the reading of scripture."⁵ Sacred scripture, theology, and doctrine were habitually regarded as one thing and used as synonyms.⁶ Thus, the ability to decode letters, our reading, was understood to afford a greater proximity to God, but it was no object in itself. The science it served was, traditionally, the affair of a specialized and highly trained elite, but its fruits were for the benefit of all, and the work of salvation required they be extended to all.⁷ To the extent that other media and methods were implemented and explored as ways of bringing the Word to the larger body of the church, these could be understood as forms and variations of, or alternatives to, *lectio*, the monks or cleric's reading. The terms *laicus* and *auditor* were used as near synonyms in the sense that laymen received through sermons what the *doctores* could gain by reading;⁸ equally common was the identification of laymen

2 The following have most influenced my thinking in this area: Carruthers, *Memory*, esp. chap. 5, "Memory and the Ethics of Reading"; Clanchy, *Memory*, esp. pp. 192–98, 268–72, 285–89; Leclercq, *Love of Learning*; and Morrison, *History*. See also Robertson, *Lectio divina*.

3 The various metaphors for sacred reading, such as gathering flowers in a field (whence the term *florilegium*), the bee collecting pollen to produce honey, or the pervasive emphasis in monastic culture on reading as *ruminatio* (the remastication of partially digested food); are more than poetic embellishments; they are pregnant visual and sensory models for inward experience. *Legere* originally meant "to gather, to collect"; the same is true of the German verb for 'read' or *lesen*, which still means 'to harvest, to choose or select today. The images thus visualize the larger process of collection and memory as the true objective of *legere*, in which literacy was only one useful technical skill. See Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, pp. 15–17, 182–85; and Robertson, *Lectio divina*, pp. 57–71, 104–7, and *passim*.

4 See Henri de Lubac's introduction to "Scripture and Revelation," in *Medieval Exegesis*, pp. 24–39.

5 Rupert of Deutz, *In Apocalypsim*, 825; the introduction is also printed in *Deutsche Mystikerbriefe*, p. 14. On Rupert's and contemporary views of scripture in the contemplative life, see Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 69–70, and more generally Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, pp. 71–86.

6 Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1, pp. 27–29.

7 Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1, p. 28, summarizes Augustine's teaching in *De Doctrina Christiana* with the words, "Knowledge of the faith amounted to knowledge of Scripture"; and cites St Julian of Toledo as stating that "All doctrinal teaching was 'an explication of the Scriptures.'" Such statements become all but commonplace in the twelfth century, when scripture is seen as the mirror or measure of all things Christian.

8 Grundmann, "Litteratus-Ilitteratus," 43–44.

as viewers, for, as it was put in the favourite authority on the use of images in worship, Gregory the Great's reply to Bishop Serenus of Marseille:

what writing offers to those who read it [*legentibus*], a picture offers to the ignorant [*idiotis*] who look at it, since in the picture the ignorant [*ignorantes*] see what they ought to follow, in it they read who do not know letters; whence especially for the gentiles [*gentibus*] a picture stands in place of reading [*pro lectione*].⁹

The justification for this equation appears to have resided for Gregory himself in the idea that *legere* constitutes access to deeper understanding of a sign, successful negotiation of the distance between sign and signified. The *idiotae* of which he spoke became *legentes*, and thus qualified members of the Christian community, when they properly apprehended "through a picture's story ... what must be adored."¹⁰ But the layman's visual reading could take place only exceptionally through actual visual art; far more common and in any case more forward in the twelfth-century mind were the role of the visible *exemplum* and a learning through the visible presence of moral models.¹¹ To receive moral instruction in this way could likewise be seen as an alternative form of reading.¹² Just as scripture was synonymous with all Christian teaching, one was engaged in *reading/legere* whenever Christian teaching was assimilated to the self.

In keeping with these contours of the medieval culture of the written word, I apply the term "reading" in this book not only, and not even primarily, to the activity of meditating on and interpreting written texts; I take it instead to comprise potentially the broad spectrum of mediary practices that served the larger objective of which the monk's or cleric's reading was the masterwork: the assimilation of the Word to the self. Understood in this way, all reading points to Mary's experience at the Annunciation as its archetype and enabler. But before I return to this subject, some attention to the broader context of the developments addressed in this chapter is in order.

Few are the moments in the history of the church when the pastoral obligation just evoked was felt so acutely and engaged with such innovative fervour as in the twelfth century. The advent of a new, interiorized piety—most especially the emphasis on devotion to the humanity of Christ and the corollary role of Mary as *mediatrix* between man and God—the intensity and fervour with which the various orders renew the ossified enterprise of biblical commentary, most specifically and remarkably with respect to the Song of Songs, the diverse experimentation among authors of religious instruction with new ways of implementing images in combination with text, the renewal of musical composition and liturgical innovation undertaken by the Victorines, and, independently

⁹ As translated in Chazelle, "Pictures," 139–40. The Latin text reads: "Alius est enim picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere. Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes vident quod sequi debant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt; unde praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est" (Gregory, *Registrum epistularum*, p. 874).

¹⁰ Chazelle, "Pictures," 145–50.

¹¹ Bynum, *Docere*.

¹² Mulder-Bakker, "Metamorphosis of Woman," pp. 117–19.

of them, Hildegard: all these projects can be understood as the exclusive province of a monastic or semi-monastic elite, but they are no less expressive of a redefinition of the relationship between humanity and the Logos, a media revolution accomplished through monastic reading. The nature and understanding of this “elite” was itself in transformation in this period, part of what Giles Constable has described as “the reformation of the twelfth-century.” The diversification and intensification of the monastic search for spiritual perfection that is so evident in the founding of the various reformed orders beginning in the late eleventh century is part of a broader effort “to monasticize the world and interiorize monastic virtues [that] ended by consecrating everyone and all human activities.”¹³ The innovative uses and combinations of media evoked here were understood in their own time as various means of “translating” the Word, that is, of rendering the *experience* of scripture accessible to new audiences both inside and outside the cloister walls. This reading experience, from its monastic understanding, is one of entering into the presence of the divine. In the discussion of the exegesis of the Song of Songs below, the task of interpreting the biblical text is to be understood in this way, as the lexical alchemy of divine presence.¹⁴ The new interest among the clerical elite in the jongleur’s art of performance, which will concern us in later chapters, is another aspect of this larger project: performance translates presence.

Hildegard offers here a case in point. As Margot Fassler has argued, the innovations represented by Hildegard’s music, dramatic compositions, and theological works—that is, her extraordinary breadth of production in sound, image, and text—can be understood as parallel and interdependent attempts at a multi-medial translation of the Word; an educational programme for her nuns, to be sure, but one that saw them as being taught and transformed through the act and experience of listening and singing, viewing and performing. Moreover, as both Fassler and Bruce Holsinger have emphasized, Hildegard “defined the rendering of communal song as an incarnational act.”¹⁵ In song, as in their reading lives as a whole, her nuns understood and experienced their performance of the monastic office as a continuation or re-embodiment of Mary’s conception and bearing of the Word.¹⁶ This idea is central to Hildegard’s understanding of her compositional powers, and it is only further underlined in the way contemporaries saw these powers in relation to their own lives. Hildegard became herself a *mediatrix*, an avatar of Mary’s function as the body that gave flesh to the Word. As I will argue here, this understanding of her relationship to Mary effectively places Hildegard’s creative activity at the point of intersection between two major wellsprings of twelfth-century religious renewal: the articulation of a feminine position for the reading subject, which is at the centre of a redefinition of monastic *lectio*, and the “pastoral revolution,” which witnessed

¹³ Constable, *Reformation*, p. 326.

¹⁴ Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion,” 88–89 and passim; Robertson, *Lectio divina*, pp. 163, 167–68.

¹⁵ Fassler, “Composer,” p. 149; Holsinger, *Music*, pp. 87–136, esp. pp. 93–94 and 126.

¹⁶ Fassler, “Composer,” pp. 166–68. Holsinger, *Music*, p. 125, argues similarly, but the idea is secondary to his attempt to elucidate the “homoerotics of Marian devotion” in Hildegard’s musical compositions.

“a radical transformation of the catechesis based on the valorisation of the word as an instrument of mediation and seduction,” the attempt to deliver the Logos as presence to the entire church.¹⁷ Equally, the descent of the divine into the “weak sex,” as recorded in the Annals of Pöhlde and manifest in the writings of Hildegard and Elisabeth, was not a renegade new idea of middle-Rhenish female monasticism. It belongs within a context of intense activity around the female religious life that comprises both French and German-speaking Europe beginning in the late eleventh century and includes the recasting of the monastic reading life for religious women—the subject of the next chapter.

It is my argument in what follows that Hildegard’s visionary exegesis and her own understanding of her position as the untaught and unworthy female body that serves as vessel of God’s word constitute the embodiment—one woman’s experience—of an epochal development in monastic reading: the invention of Mary’s life as the perfect (female) act of Christian reading. This invention is first fully articulated by Rupert of Deutz in his commentary on the Song of Songs. Hildegard takes the authority for her visionary persona from Rupert’s definition of his own exegetical persona as *altera Maria*. His commentary defines the position and experience of the *sponsa*, the bride, as fully realized in Mary’s life, and thus as an object of reading *imitatio* accessible directly, not through the learned arts of exegesis but rather as human experience that was also inescapably female. From Rupert’s conception of his reading self to Hildegard’s prophetic persona—first as she, the woman, formulated and understood it, and then as others, men, received and recorded it—we see exemplified how one woman’s experience of God, Mary’s, inimitable and ineffable, becomes nevertheless a model for reading as a feminized soul; how the same could be re-embodied as a living woman’s auditory and visual reception and “bearing” of the Word, and, finally, how this woman’s gnosis represented the singular embodiment of the reading of the “non-reader”: the woman, the layman, and the illiterate. Women, once again, become the focal point, the living exemplars, of an illiterate *lectio*, here offered them as the embodied bride.

Both Rupert and Hildegard are in this regard at once extraordinary innovators and merely the voices of much larger phenomena in twelfth-century spiritual renewal. My concern is not to treat these phenomena in a comprehensive way but rather to explore—as in the preceding chapter—the way the reading identities of key figures articulate and embody latent possibilities such that these solidify as the commonplaces of a new discourse on reading and gnosis.

The Annunciation as a Reading Moment

There was and could be no more perfect example of the assimilation of the Word to the self than Mary’s experience of the Annunciation, where this was understood as the moment in which she conceived.¹⁸ A human body conceived the Word and gave it flesh,

¹⁷ Vauchez, *Laity*, p. 100; see also Watson, “Conceptions,” 102.

¹⁸ Despite competing opinions and moments of dissent, the two moments had been taken as identical since patristic times; see Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, p. 20. On the idea of Mary’s experience as a model of perfect assimilation of the Word, see Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, pp. 77–85, esp. pp. 77 and

later to bring it forth as life. The hermeneutic leap from letter to gloss, from the prophetic images of the Old Testament to their fulfilled meaning as God-made-flesh, was completed by Mary one time for all, in such a way as to enable Christ, the Book of Life, to become accessible to all. Still, the potential analogy between this moment and an idea of reading in the Christian life does not seem to have been truly discovered and exploited in the Latin West until the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Moreover, the importance of this discovery, the significance of Mary's experience to the redefinition of the reading subject in twelfth-century monastic thought, has yet to be recognized as such by modern scholarship.¹⁹ It is no surprise then, that the same is true of the significance of the introduction, around 1100, of an open book into the iconography of the Annunciation.²⁰

In the Eastern church, Mary, when given an occupation, was generally shown spinning thread for the veil of the temple, and this representation persisted there into modern times. The Western iconography of the Annunciation at times also used this motif (fig. 2.1) but more often showed Mary standing, often in *orans*, facing Gabriel as he delivered his message (fig. 2.2). This representation is increasingly displaced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by one of Mary interrupted in devout reading, which dominates the late-medieval iconography.²¹ In 1960, Otto Pächt, as part of his analysis of the St Albans Psalter (ca. 1120–ca. 1140), which contains a reading Annunciate that stands near the beginning of this last development (fig. 4.3; see p. 147), noted that although “this motif revolutionized the pictorial treatment of the Annunciation,” it had at the time of his writing scarcely even been identified as a problem in the scholarship.²² More recent work has considered the function of the instruments of literacy within medieval iconography of the Annunciation in some detail, but it has neither addressed Pächt's findings nor adequately accounted for the moment at the turn of the eleventh century when, as his evidence indicated, the idea of Mary's reading at the Annunciation appears to acquire a special meaning and becomes broadly established as both a verbal and visual image. Instead, subsequent scholarship has concentrated on late-medieval examples as evidence of developing literacy and a literate mentality.²³ What has been

81. On the same idea in the later Middle Ages, see Miles, “Annunciation as Model”; and Guldán, “Verkündigungsbild,” 145–69.

19 *JP* constitutes a comprehensive corrective in this regard; see esp. pp. 464–66.

20 Miles “Origins,” 632–33; but see below, note 23. For a general overview of the Annunciation in church doctrine and iconography, see Hirn, *Sacred Shrine*, pp. 271–301; and Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, esp. pp. 77–87 for the period around 1100.

21 Emminghaus “Verkündigung,” pp. 423–31; Hirn, *Sacred Shrine*, pp. 279–80; Künstle, *Ikongraphie*, pp. 336–41; Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, p. 129.

22 *SAP*, p. 63.

23 Schreiner, “Marienverehrung,” 314–68; Schreiner, “Konnte Maria lesen?” 1437–64; Wenzel, “Verkündigung,” pp. 23–52; Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, pp. 270–91. Schreiner's work in particular tends to leave the eleventh and twelfth centuries out of account, instead linking late-medieval texts and images with biblical commentary and apocrypha of the early Middle Ages. As a result, he overlooks the changing significance of Mary's reading act, equating it throughout with literacy and bookishness. Miles, “Origins,” remedies Schreiner's chronological oversight but not the conceptual

overlooked is the isolation of Mary's experience at the Annunciation as a reading moment, a moment, that is, when the Christian soul is privileged to a perfect knowledge of the Word. This moment appears to have been discovered as a focal point of devotional reading sometime around 1100, and one way of visualizing the development was to place the Annunciate before an open book.

The idea that a book was one of the essential accoutrements of Gabriel's encounter with Mary was not unknown before the period around 1100, but examples of it in visual art are rare.²⁴ The two earliest appear to stem directly or indirectly from one Carolingian workshop in Metz.²⁵ These and a textual counterpart from the same period, the Annunciation as recounted in Otfrid von Weissenburg's *Evangelienbuch* (ca. 860), doubtless drew their inspiration from apocryphal gospels such as the Pseudo Matthew, which portrayed Mary weaving and singing the Psalms.²⁶ As a rare textual witness, Otfrid's description provides our best indication of how the visual invention should be read.²⁷

In Otfrid's text, Gabriel finds Mary "with the psalter in her hands, which she often sang from beginning to end." Lest the question whether the book was open—that is, whether Mary was "reading" and praying as Gabriel arrived—seem overly punctilious, it should be noted that the continuation reads, "[he found her] occupied with the weaving of beautiful fabrics ... an activity that always pleased her."²⁸ The complications involved in holding the psalter and weaving simultaneously have not gone unnoticed in commentary on the passage, and, as Gisela Vollmann-Profe concludes, the reason is that Otfrid's description is not concerned with "what happened in that moment when," but rather with the conduct of Mary's life in general, that is, with the portrayal

one: here, too, an open book is necessarily an invitation to and a model for engagement of the literate arts; Miles's account of the twelfth century in particular is faulty and under-documented. Lesley Smith recognizes the need to distinguish between Mary's psalter prayer and literacy or reading generally in Smith, "Scriba, femina," pp. 22–23; see also Clanchy, "Images of Ladies," 112–13.

24 In *SAP*, pp. 63–67, Otto Pächt traced both iconographic and textual precedents; further detail on textual precedents is found in Schreiner, "Marienverehrung," 318–25. For an updated and incisive account of the few examples that precede the Saint Albans Psalter, see Deshman, *Benedictional*, pp. 9–17, 262–66, and passim. Three further examples from the final quarter of the tenth century can be seen in Palazzo, *Sacramentaires*, pp. 39–41 and plates 14, 34, 109.

25 An ivory casket in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig, dated ca. 860–870, and an ivory situla in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (cat. no. 17.190.45), dated there to ca. 860–880 (www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/17.190.45, accessed January 24, 2013); but cf. Deshman, *Benedictional*, p. 265: "c. 1000"; on both examples see Deshman, *Benedictional*, pp. 262–66 and figs. 1, 207, 208; on the casket, *SAP*, p. 66, pl. 118e; and Goldschmidt, *Elfenbeinskulpturen*, pp. 52–53, no. 96, plates 44, 45; and vol. 2, p. 45.

26 Vollmann-Profe, *Evangelienbuch*, p. 199.

27 *Evangelienbuch* 1.5, lines 1–72.

28 "er ... fand sia ... / mit sálteru in henti then sáng si unz in entí; / Wáhero dúacho werk wírkento / diurero gárno, thaz déda siu io géрно," *Evangelienbuch*, lines 10–12; for commentary (and the modern German translation on which mine is based) see Vollmann-Profe, *Evangelienbuch*, pp. 191 and 199–202.



Figure 2.1. Annunciation. Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, early twelfth century.
Photo © Daniel Villafruela, GNU Free Documentation License.

of Mary as a model of the contemplative life.²⁹ *Ora et labora*, Otfrid's own Benedictine ideal, is identified with the beginning of the Christian faith through the portrayal of the Annunciation.

A number of modern scholars have been more inclined to the idea that Otfrid was modelling an ideal of the devout noblewoman, which then leads Klaus Schreiner to the conclusion that his description "played a decisive role in making Mary into the prototype of the reading woman."³⁰ Certainly a lay audience of Otfrid's vernacular biblical epic

²⁹ Vollmann-Profe, *Evangelienbuch*, p. 199; see also pp. 198–99, 200, 202.

³⁰ Schreiner, "Marienverehrung," 323. The view that Otfrid portrays Mary as the ideal noblewoman stems from the text's first editor, Oskar Erdmann, *Otfrids Evangelienbuch*, p. 356.



Figure 2.2. Annunciation. Lintel frieze, Chartres Cathedral, France, ca. 1145–1150.

Photo © Jane Vadal.

may have opted for a gendered identification between Mary and women's prayer. For Schreiner, however, Mary's psalter prayer points to literacy, bookishness, and hunger for learning.³¹ These ideas, for the High Middle Ages at least, turn out to be very much beside the point.

The most salient indications that literacy is not the issue are found in the iconography itself, and here the Annunciation in the St Albans Psalter proves an extraordinarily revealing witness. Not only a book has been interpolated into the scene. The second all but ubiquitous feature of the (later) Annunciation as a visual event, the descending dove, also makes one of its first appearances here. From our vantage point,

31 "Maria, mit den Augen des Mittelalters betrachtet, war der Inbegriff einer bücherhungrigen, lesefreudigen und wissenschaftlich gebildeten Frau" (Schreiner, "Marienverehrung," 317).



Figure 2.3. Annunciation (detail), St Albans Psalter. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1 (Property of the Basilica of St Godehard, Hildesheim), p. 19.

© Dombibliothek Hildesheim.

it is only too easy to overlook the fact that only the descending dove visually identifies Gabriel's announcement as the moment in which Mary conceives the Word, that is, as the Incarnation. Rubbing of the painted surface has partly effaced the detail in the St Albans picture, but a dove is still visible flying horizontally as if directly into Mary's ear (fig. 2.3).³² The dove enters the iconography with a chronological progression conspicuously parallel to that of Mary's book. Before the period ca. 1100, Annunciation scenes that thus visualize the Spirit's descent are rarer still in Western art than are those with books, the sole known examples being a fifth-century mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and an illustration in a psalter from Saint-Germain-des-Prés of the first half of the ninth century.³³ The dove then reappears from the late eleventh century onward to become, in the later Middle Ages, nearly as indispensable as Gabriel himself.

32 All illustrations from the St Albans Psalter appear by generous permission of the Dombibliothek in Hildesheim. The codex, MS St Godehard 1, is the property of the Basilica of St Godehard, Hildesheim. To avoid repetition, I have included this information below the first illustration from the psalter only, figure 2.3.

33 Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, bibl. fol. 23, fol. 83v, widely known as the Stuttgart Psalter. See also Kitzinger, "Descent," pp. 99–115.

An early recurrence of the dove in one Annunciation from ca. 1100 may, in its very peculiarity, reveal the point of the change. This is an ivory book cover that not only illustrates Luke 1:35 but also, it seems, visualizes the conception itself (fig. 2.4).³⁴ Gabriel raises his hand in speech to Mary, who is seated on the right in a configuration very like the one in the St Albans Psalter. Above the two and possibly outside or beyond their view—it is in a space in the centre over the architectural frame—a dove is shown flying vertically downwards. The rays from its beak extend to a small bust, apparently of Christ, which emerges from a horizontally oriented quarter-moon, possibly a symbol of Mary. If it is correct to interpret this scene as integral to the Annunciation, then what it portrays is “what occurs in Mary’s body and what is made known to her.”³⁵ From the illustration of an episode from Mary’s life we have moved to one that instead seeks to visualize the point of origin of all Christian knowing.

Yet a third element distinguishes the St Albans Annunciation as a prototype of later medieval understanding of the Annunciation. The dove does not pass alone from Gabriel’s lips to Mary’s ear. It rides, as it were, on his voice, manifest in fine white lines that span the distance (fig. 2.3). The picture is perhaps the earliest known visual representation in the West of a *conceptio per aurem*, the idea that the Word penetrated Mary’s body by passing through her ear. The role of this idea in shaping the meaning of the Annunciation within Christian devotion has been sorely neglected. It is, however, no mere visual conceit but rather emerged as a focal point of doctrinal controversy over Christ’s dual nature, divine and human, that was first played out in the Eastern church in the early fifth century.³⁶ Within this controversy—of which twelfth-century authorities were well informed—Mary’s conception through the ear served as the response to dissenting opinions over whether Christ was divine from conception or merely “the mortal man Jesus in whom it pleased the Word to dwell.”³⁷ The only scriptural moment available to refute such ideas was Luke’s account of the Annunciation; the *conceptio per*

34 Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nr. 2787, possibly from Northern France; see www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=1719650&viewType=detailView (accessed August 26, 2019).

35 Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, p. 126. Indeed, the tip of Gabriel’s “speaking” index finger touches the bottom of the quarter-moon. Both Gössmann and Guldán, “Verkündigungsbild,” 149–50, interpret the scene as the conception; Guldán therefore calls it the oldest representation of the Incarnation in Western art.

36 Constan, *Proclus*, pp. 273–313. So far as the Western church is concerned, the *conceptio per aurem* has been studied only in art historical literature, where it is at times dismissed as the embarrassing materialization of a properly spiritual idea. One exception, although of limited use to study of the Middle Ages, is Jones, “Empfängnis,” 135–204. For art historical study of the late-medieval tradition, see Steinberg, “Filippo Lippi’s ‘Annunciation,’” 25–44; and Jongh, “De conceptie,” 24–43. The most useful general introduction remains Hirn, *Sacred Shrine*, pp. 296–98.

37 Constan, *Proclus*, p. 51. For twelfth-century reception of these ideas, see Gerhoh of Reichersberg, *De gloria*, 1073–160, esp. 1105A–B, 1148C, 1151B. Gerhoh’s treatise recapitulates the entire controversy to establish anew that Mary conceived in the moment the angel spoke the words concerning “the Most High” (Luke 1:32), thereby conceiving and bearing the divine Word.



Figure 2.4. Annunciation. Ivory book cover. Northern France, ca. 1100. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nr. 2787. Photo: Jörg P. Anders, Berlin

aurem, therefore, established that Mary had conceived in the moment of Gabriel's communication to her and that she had conceived from his voice as the vehicle of the Word, a sound that passed through her eardrum and entered her womb.³⁸ As she was made to say through the preachers who spoke for her, "An angel appeared and ... I heard a word, I conceived a Word, and I delivered a Word." Similarly, Christ reported that Gabriel had been sent before him to "speak into the ears of the spiritual ark, and to prepare for me the entrances of her ear."³⁹

Nicholas Conostas, to whom we owe the recent excavation of these origins of the *conceptio per aurem* for modern scholarship, has argued that the fifth-century Byzantine school of thought that promulgated Mary's auricular conception and her status as *Theotokos*, "birth-giver to God," established by the same means a new poetics of sound and sight, more generally then, of the sensory mediation of the Logos. His words are worth quoting in full, for they provide an uncannily appropriate introduction to the parallel developments in the Latin West that concern us in this book:

When the "Word became flesh" (John 1:14) the verbal was woven together with the visual in a seamless fabric fashioned from two fundamental modes of communication. In the ongoing intertwining of word and image, the experience of the ear is reinforced by that of the eye, which in turn seeks confirmation through touch, for "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes," was also "touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1–2). Doubt seeks certainty in the desire to touch the wounded body of the Word (John 20:25); faith seeks fulfilment by clasping the hem of his garment (Matthew 9:21), for the infringed form of the divine longs not merely to be gazed upon but to be touched. "Put your finger here, and place your hand in my side" (John 20:27) is an invitation which beckons the eye of the spectator to become the hand of a participant.⁴⁰

In the twelfth century as in the fifth, Mary's role in humanity's salvation lay like a latent fulcrum awaiting discovery. It offered the leverage to move into place and mobilize an entire mediary orchestra in the service of devotion to the humanity of Christ and thus also to suggest a paradoxical divinity of the body. The *conceptio per aurem* served as "a form of symbolic shorthand" for the idea at the theological centre of this momentous development; moreover, as Conostas concludes, this

appropriation of hearing as a theological category required an imaginative charting of the (female, virginal, maternal) body and its senses ... [in which] the ambivalent logic of the lower bodily material zone was relocated to the highest levels of sense perception and intellection, thereby de-sexualizing the virgin birth of Christ, or, in what is also true, re-sexualizing it within a different view of sexual union.⁴¹

38 As Pseudo-Athanasius put it, "Just as the sunlight passes through a pane of glass without shattering it, so too did the Son of God pass through the glass window, that is, through the ears of the Virgin without destroying her virginity" (*Quaestiones aliae*, 19; cited in Conostas, *Proclus*, p. 281).

39 Proclus of Constantinople, Homily 36; and Ps.-Gregory Thaumaturgus, Homily 3; both as cited and trans. in Conostas, *Proclus*, p. 280.

40 Conostas, *Proclus*, p. 315.

41 Conostas, *Proclus*, pp. 282, 312.

Such a statement brings us into remarkable proximity with the project of Rupert of Deutz, to be examined shortly for its generative significance in the twelfth century's own Marian media revolution.

The Annunciation in the St Albans Psalter has itself come to us as part of one of the most notable early examples of such deliberate mediary orchestration, one that charts, promotes, or abets a woman's visionary—or, more properly, sensory—experience of the presence of Christ in her life and will be examined as such in [chapter 4](#). Such unequivocal portrayals of the *conceptio per aurem* remain very much the exception in Western art until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and one reason for this may well be the complexity of the argument of which it is a part.⁴² In monastic theological and exegetical writing of the first half of the twelfth century, on the other hand, the *conceptio per aurem* finds explicit and repeated mention after having been apparently more or less forgotten by Western writers since patristic times.⁴³ But the central idea was not inextricably bound to Mary's ear. With its illustration of Gabriel's voice as the apparent vehicle of the dove's flight, the St Albans Annunciation can be taken as a reminder that the idea that Mary conceived in the moment of Gabriel's announcement and through his words to her could as easily be stated as a conception through the voice, *a voce*, as it were.⁴⁴ We will encounter it in this form elsewhere, and thus it is treated as well in a

42 Another prominent twelfth-century example (dated 1181) is found in Nicholas of Verdun's elaborate typological image programme for the altar at Kloster Neuenburg. It likewise includes an open book on a lectern, but lacks the dove.

43 These statements reflect current knowledge of the Western tradition, which is in need of further study. A search of the *Patrologia Latina* reveals no mention of the *conceptio per aurem* before the twelfth century and later than Agobard of Lyons (d. 816), but Deshman points out that it occurs in a hymn for the Annunciation feast at Winchester in Aethelwold's time (late tenth century; see Deshman, *Benedictional*, pp. 13–14). It is common in patristic writings up to and including Gregory the Great, as also noted by Constanas, *Proclus*, p. 274n4. To the list of occurrences in the Latin church given there, the following additions or corrections should be noted: Pseudo-Ambrose, *Sermo* 47. *In cap. 30 Proverbia de differentia Salomonis et aliorum prophetarum*, PL 65:700; Eleutherius Tornacensis, *Sermo in annuntiationis festum*, PL 65:98; Gregory the Great, *Liber responsalis sine antiphonarius*, PL 78:731; Agobard of Lyons, *De correctione antiphonarii*, 8, as cited in Jones, "Empfängnis," 137. The passage listed by Constanas as Augustine, *Sermo in natali Domini* 7, PL 39:1991, is also found in a nearly identical text attributed elsewhere to Fulgentius, *Sermo 36 De laudibus Mariae ex partu Salvatoris*, PL 65:899. Twelfth-century witnesses include Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo 2 in festo Pentecostes, Sancti Bernardi opera*, 5, ed. J. Leclercq and H. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1968), p. 167 (PL 183:327); Hugh of St Victor, *De inquisitione mysticae arcae*, PL 176:733–34; Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Sermo 8 in omni festivitate B. Mariae Matris Domini*, PL 157:267. The idea occurs in German vernacular works beginning in the early twelfth century with Frau Ava (see below pp. 59–60) and then the *Sankt Trudperter Hohelied* (pp. 36/37, 551–52); and is found among courtly poets by ca. 1200, as witnessed by Walther von der Vogelweide's "Leich," lines 5, 23–26, p. 6. Another frequently cited instance from Walther's work (for example, Künstle, *Ikongraphie*, p. 339) is no longer regarded as authentic: see Walther von der Vogelweide, *Werke*, 12a.3, lines 5–6, and commentary p. 433.

44 This is especially apparent in comparison with the iconographic tradition of the Byzantine Psalters, which always show the dove descending directly from Heaven, often guided or released by the hand of God. The Trinitarian emphasis that Kitzinger sees in this iconography would not seem to apply to the St Albans picture; here it is instead the efficacy of Gabriel's voice that is given visual form; cf. Kitzinger, "Descent," 106–9 and 114–15.

twelfth-century treatise on the fifth-century controversy by Gerhoh of Reichersberg.⁴⁵ The central point for my argument remains the same: whether through the dove, the open book, or the auricular conception, what we encounter in early twelfth-century representation of the Annunciation, verbal or visual, is a concentrated focus on the event as that moment in time in which Christian knowing was conceived, in body as in mind.

But what then, finally, do we make of Mary's open book? Of the three distinctive features just discussed, the book is the one that most clearly reflects the twelfth-century mind; it is also the only one that could serve as a bridge between Mary's experience and that of the medieval Christian.⁴⁶ Once the Annunciation was associated with Mary's reading (or prayer, or meditation on scripture), it became an experience that was implicitly, and for some explicitly, approachable through that same activity. If our continuing concern thus remains with "her" book and the reading act it implies, it should now be amply clear that actual literacy is not at stake; similarly, it must be remembered that what is at stake is far more momentous, and could be and was being represented in several ways at once.

Otfrid's account of Gabriel's visit to Mary makes psalter prayer into an attribute of Mary's devout way of life and is neither concerned with the specific event of the Annunciation as conception nor with a causal relationship between it and Mary's reading.⁴⁷ This latter notion is, in fact, an ancient one, but it rather arises in connection with Mary's reading of the prophet Isaiah. The idea that Mary "had read" the prophetic words announcing her own role in the Incarnation occurs in the biblical commentaries of the church fathers, and the difference between these and one twelfth-century witness, the Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1166), is most revealing.⁴⁸ Both Ambrose (d. 397) and Bede (d. 735) mention that Mary *had read*, before Gabriel's arrival, of the event that was to be fulfilled in her and emphasize the idea that the meaning of the prophet's image was not clear to her; even she could not know how it was to be accomplished. As Ambrose put it (commenting on Gabriel's words): "Denique, 'Accipe,' inquit, 'tibi signum: Ecce virgo in utero accipiet, et pariet filium.' Legerat hoc Maria, ideo credidit futurum; sed quomodo fieret, ante non legerat" ("Indeed," he says, "receive unto yourself the sign: *behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son*" [Isaiah 7:14]. Mary had read this, thus she believed it would happen, but how it would happen, this she had not read).⁴⁹ The idea of reading enters into the commentary on Luke to demonstrate a theological

⁴⁵ See note 37, above.

⁴⁶ Constat, *Proclus*, pp. 315–58, argues that the idea of Mary spinning at a loom operated as a similar "bridge" for the Christians of fifth-century Constantinople.

⁴⁷ Most telling on this point is the fact that Otfrid's otherwise copious account entirely omits the crucial words, *Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi*; see Vollmann-Profe, *Evangelienbuch*, pp. 205–6.

⁴⁸ *SAP*, pp. 64–66.

⁴⁹ Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, p. 38. The passage from Bede, which is nearly identical to Ambrose's, is found in *In Lucae evangelium expositio* 1.35, p. 33: "Quia ergo legerat, 'Ecce virgo in utero habebit et pariet filium' [Isaiah 7:14], sed quomodo id fieri posset non legerat merito credula his quae legerat sciscitatur ab angelo quod in propheta non invenit."

idea: Mary represents humanity in its unenlightened state before the Incarnation. What was not yet written, she had “not yet read,” that is, she could not yet know. In addition, neither commentator mentions *when* Mary read the prophecy; indeed, *legerat* might mean she had previously committed it to memory by whatever means. The important idea is the state of her and our knowledge before the coming of Christ; what was knowable was what was “readable.” What happens in this moment is no less clear. As Ambrose goes on, “Hodie primum auditur, ‘spiritus sanctus superveniet in te’ et auditur et creditur” (For on this day was heard for the first time, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you” [Luke 1:35], thus it was heard and thus it was believed).⁵⁰

By the mid twelfth century this idea has been altered in telling ways. In a sermon for the feast of the Annunciation, Aelred of Rievaulx envisions the very event as follows:

Ingressus, inquit, angelus ad eam. Non est igitur inventa foris in oculis carnis, non est inventa in nundinis. Intus erat, in secreto cubiculo suo erat, ubi orabat patrem suum in abscondito. Audeamne conicere quid eo momento temporis agebat, quibus utebatur meditationibus, quali oratione pascebatur? Forte in manibus tenebat Isaiam et ordine legendi in illud inciderat capitulum: Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium et vocabitur nomen eius Emmanuel.⁵¹

(The angel came to her, it says [Luke 1:28]. This did not happen out of doors under worldly eyes, it did not happen at the marketplace. She was inside, concealed in her chamber, where she was praying to her father in seclusion. May I venture to suggest what she was doing at that moment in time, to which meditations her attention was devoted, what prayer she was savouring? Perchance she held in her hands the book of Isaiah, and in her reading had just come upon the chapter: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel [Isaiah 7:14].”)

Aelred’s portrayal changes the emphasis entirely. His interest is in the moment, *eo momento temporis*; he seeks to know the precise state of Mary’s mind when Gabriel arrived and thus to enter into her experience.⁵² Aelred in fact revisited the same moment in two other sermons, always with the same intense concentration on Mary’s meditation over the very prophetic words to whose fulfilment she will lend the flesh.⁵³

Credo quod in hac serie lectionis humilitas et caritas in Virginis pectore compugnabant, ... Ecce virgo concipiet. Felix, inquit, virgo cui cum virginitatis signaculo caelestis promittitur generatio! Felix venter in concipiendo, felicia ubera in lactando, felicia brachia in amplectando! ... Forte in hac meditatione concalvit cor eius et aculeis amoris excitabatur affectus eius et in lacrimas solvebatur. Forte sic affectam angelus inveniens: “Ave,” inquit, “gratia plena.”⁵⁴

50 Bede (see the preceding note) follows Ambrose in this respect as well. For either commentator, the focus of argument is faith as opposed to skepticism; Mary’s faith in what she had read properly disposes her for the event that makes the truth manifest, once and for all time.

51 *Sermones*, 59.9–10, 2B:121.

52 Bernard of Clairvaux amply displays the same interest in his *In laudibus “Maria, mit den Augen des Mittelalters betrachtet, war der Inbegriff einer b ü cherhungrigen, lesefreudigen und wissenschaftlich gebildeten Frau,” Schreiner, “Marienverehrung,” 317. Virginis Matris*, otherwise known as “Missus est.” See the discussion in the next chapter, pp. 102–6.

53 *Sermones*, 9.18–19, 2A:74–75; also *Sermones*, 60.16, 2B:132–33.

54 *Sermones*, 59.10, 2B:121.

(I believe that while she was thus reading, humility and love were wrestling with one another within the virgin's breast. ... "Behold a virgin shall conceive." [Isaiah 7:14] "O how happy," she says, "is a virgin to whom it is granted to bear heavenly offspring with her virginity intact! O happy womb thus conceiving, happy breasts thus giving milk, happy arms thus embracing!" Perhaps her heart burned in just such a meditation and her emotions were stirred by the sharp prickings of love and released in tears. Perhaps she is thus moved when the angel, arriving, says "Hail, full of grace" [Luke 1:28].)

In none of his three variations on this moment does Aelred state explicitly that Mary conceived on being greeted by the angel, but neither does he state how or when this otherwise occurred. By leaving the idea unspoken, he arguably allows it more inner force. Twice he sets the scene thus: "Hauriebat sibi aquas in gaudio de fontibus Salvatoris, id est de Scripturis sanctis, ubi legerat et Virginis partum et Salvatoris adventum." (She was drinking unto herself the "waters with joy from the fountains of the Saviour" [Isaiah 12:3] where she read of the virgin giving birth and the Saviour's coming.)⁵⁵ What interests him is in its essence ineffable, an experience in which scripture becomes so immediate, so present, as to be imbibed into the self as body. The event is therefore not named but instead made present for our own contemplation. Moreover, by making Mary's reading of the prophecy, the *signum*, into the act that prepares its fulfilment in her body, he makes her experience of the conception, the fulfilment of the letter as flesh, into her own reading—that is, praying—act. Mary does not merely submit to the will of the Lord, she reads in a way that implies a role in making it come about.⁵⁶

A similarly striking alteration of the scene surrounding the idea of Mary's prayer is recorded in the very early German poems of Frau Ava (d. 1127). In "Das Leben Jesu," Gabriel arrives to find Mary "where she sat alone in her room. She was praying for the world's salvation." The ensuing exchange is then summarized first with these lines:

si bette umbe daz heil der werlte,
do chom ir des sie gerte.
der heilige spiritus sanctus
der bephiench ir die wambe.
er bescatwet ir den lichnamen,
do wart si swanger ane man.⁵⁷

(She was praying for the salvation of the world, and then that came to her which she desired. The holy *spiritus sanctus* impregnated her womb. It beshadowed her body, and so she became pregnant without a man.)

As if to leave no shadow of doubt, Gabriel then speaks to Mary of the conception in the perfect tense, "niht furhte du dir, / iz ist dir wol ergangen. / du hast ein chint enphangen"

55 *Sermones*, 9.18, 2A:75; s.a. 60.16, 2B:132–33.

56 This idea also emerges in twelfth-century commentaries on the Song of Songs. Possibly the earliest example is found in Rupert of Deutz. See below, pp. 253–55; also Ohly, commentary to *Trudperter Hohelied*, p. 843.

57 "Das Leben Jesu" 4,6–12, in *Ava's New Testament Narratives*, pp. 32–34. Further references are parenthetical.

(Do not be afraid: it has gone well with you, you have conceived a child) (6,4–6). Finally, Mary's experience of the event is described such that Gabriel's greeting transmits the breath of God to Mary's womb:

Do diu magit des verstunt
 daz iz chome vone got,
 und der hailige adem
 entswebete ir den lichnamen
 von den vuozen unze an den wirbel,
 do gihte her himel zuo der erde.
 daz wart da ze stete scin,
 do er sprach daz wort sin.

(7.1–8)⁵⁸

(When the maiden understood that it came from God, and the holy breath shook her body from her feet to the top of her head, then Heaven was married to the earth. This was revealed there and then, when he spoke his word.)

Ava's interest in the Annunciation, like Aelred's, lies in knowing that moment of Mary's experience when the Word was conceived in the body.⁵⁹ This moment constitutes the original act of Christian knowing (or reading), without which no other is possible. But the female recluse of Bavarian or Austrian origin writing in the vernacular at the beginning of the twelfth century testifies emphatically that this interest neither began with Aelred nor with the Cistercian order, nor was it limited to the speculation of exegetes.⁶⁰ Aelred's sermons instead represent the highly interiorized and refined expression of what was undoubtedly already a popular idea: Mary conceived the Word when Gabriel's words were delivered to her ears and as the result of an inward preparedness that was represented as her reading of scripture, or better: the conception occurs as the perfect realization of her reading act.

In visual art, the change in the understanding of this moment is mirrored in the portrayal of Mary with an open book. The first known instance in which the text of Isaiah

⁵⁸ I have modified Rushing's translation. "Heiliger adem" is indeed "Holy Spirit," but the meaning "breath" is still present in the German, and the conception could also be attributed to a breathing from God by way of Gabriel or the Holy Spirit; see Hirn, *Sacred Shrine*, pp. 297–98. In the parallel scene in "Johannes," Ava names the Spirit in Latin as *spiritus sanctus* (in *Ava's New Testament Narratives*, line 8,1).

⁵⁹ Similarly, Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, p. 102. Frau Ava treats the Annunciation similarly in a second poem on John the Baptist, where it seems that Gabriel actually announces and even effects the conception (Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, pp. 100–101), as he speaks of it first in the present and then in the perfect tense: "Über dich chumet spiritus sanctus, / Er bescatwet dine wamben. / du hast ein chint enphangen" (The *spiritus sanctus* is coming over you and beshadowing your womb. You have conceived a child) (Ava, "Johannes," in *Ava's New Testament Narratives*, 8,1–3, pp. 33–34).

⁶⁰ Ava most likely did not enter the religious life until middle age, after having raised two sons. She is thought to have become an *inclusa* under the protection of the Benedictine abbey of Melk. See Rushing, introduction to *Ava's Narratives*, pp. 1–5.



Figure 2.5. Annunciation. Capital from the Abbey of Saint-Martin d'Ainay, Lyon, France, first third of the twelfth century. Photo © Morgan Powell.

7:14 is inscribed on the pages she holds is found on a capital of the abbey church of Saint-Martin d'Ainay in Lyons and dates from the first third of the twelfth century (fig. 2.5).⁶¹ Pächt speculated that the ruled lines in Mary's open book as portrayed in the St Albans Psalter may have been intended to receive the same inscription.⁶² But perhaps the real content is no longer to be sought there, on the parchment page of Mary's book or of the psalter itself. By adding the dove that enters Mary's ear, the image dramatizes Mary's *lectio* of the prophetic word as the event in which Christ the Word was given human

⁶¹ The four capital letters would read *E[cce] V[irgo] C[oncipiet] E[manuel]*. Miles, "Origins," 654–55, is both misinformed on the dating and misreads the letters; cf. Reveyron, "L'Abbatiale de Saint-Martin d'Ainay," p. 110; and, in the same volume, Parron and Becker, "L'Abbaye d'Ainay," pp. 137–40.

⁶² As the picture cycle neither contains any other inscription nor any place in which one seems likely or planned, this one would have acquired an extraordinary importance. Where a book appears in earlier Annunciation scenes, it is likewise always blank.

flesh. Aelred's sermons and Ava's poems, I would argue, offer the verbal equivalent; in visual representation, the materialization of the idea has simply made the implicit role of the ear visibly manifest. In all three cases, the content, what is known or "read," is to be sought in the heart or soul of the listener or viewer.

Whether in verbal or visual images, the imagination of the early twelfth century dramatically isolates the Annunciation as "that moment in time" when Mary experienced the fulfilment of the letter of scripture as life; the moment of the conception is identified with the fundamental exercise of Christian reading, that is, Christian *knowing*. It is not simply the idea of the ignorance of the church before the coming of Christ that is at stake here but rather the passage from *imperfecta* to *perfecta cognitio* as a moment of illumination experienced in the—female—body. This is the perfect, or perfected act of Christian reading, and Mary's perusal of an open book is only a metaphor for its point of departure; indeed, the substance of her knowledge as of her experience reaches her by way of the ear, from which it passes directly into her *venter* and *viscera*, her womb and her flesh. Such an understanding of Mary's reading act has everything to do with the medieval import of the letter and the spirit of the Word but next to nothing to do with the social value, distribution, extent or even the use of literacy. Indeed, as we shall see, its greatest potential for the twelfth-century imagination lay in the opposite direction: in empowering an "illiterate" gnosis.

Mary's Reading and the Song of Songs

In terms of the desire they express to enter into and know Mary's experience, Aelred's sermons are no exception. They are rather typical of the development of Marian devotion beginning in the late eleventh century. As both Ann Astell and Rachel Fulton have shown, the intense desire to enter into Mary's experience by meditating on the scriptural images of her life is at the centre of and even provides the decisive impetus for Marian commentary on the Song of Songs, the interpretation of the biblical text as a prophetic account of Mary's life.⁶³ Fulton, above all, has argued that this reading of the *sensus historicus*, far from being merely another application of the established method of scriptural allegory, served the discovery of a new experience of the text. Where all commentators of this period share an idea that the Song expresses the feminine position of the soul before God, within the Marian interpretation this position is not allegory but history, fulfilled one time for all in the life of a woman. By mapping the images of the dialogue between lover and beloved onto the events of Mary's life, the exegetes of this mode did not aim beyond the text to an objective, allegorical signified but rather sought a way to sink further into it, to fuse with its "historical"—that is, subjectively lived and experienced—meaning, a "sensible union with both Mary and Christ in time."⁶⁴ Consequently, this reading of the Song for *historia* resulted in a transformation of the exegetical category itself. That dimension of meaning that could otherwise be taken

⁶³ Astell, *Song of Songs*; Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion"; and Fulton, "'Quae est ista,'"

⁶⁴ Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion," 116; see also Fulton, "Quae est ista," 117.

as identical with the letter of the text was now instead the gloss, but both letter and gloss began and ended in lived, bodily experience.⁶⁵ The truth of history, previously constructed as the report of an eyewitness, became one in which “witnessing” instead occurred through the reader’s experience of the text, the apprehension of “historical” truth through contemplation of the prophetic image.

The preconditions for this development are two, and their collusion is of paramount significance for later developments. One resides in the history of exegesis, another in the history of the liturgical expression of devotion to Mary. The idea that the prophetic images of the Old Testament could reveal to the contemplative reader details that were “missing” from the New goes back to the fathers of the church, who relied on it as a way of discovering (*invenire*), among other things, the narrative details of the Passion and Crucifixion, which were so sparsely accounted for in the Gospels.⁶⁶ Christ himself had authorized such discovery, indeed, made it an obligation, when he said, *necesse est impleri omnia quae scripta sunt in lege Moysi, et prophetis, et psalmis de me* (all things must needs be fulfilled which are written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the Psalms, concerning me) (Luke 24:44); the evangelists had shown the way by making the fulfilment of prophetic images explicit in the Gospel narratives. The fathers then undertook to “complete” the Gospel narrative by scanning the Psalms—held in part to be Christ’s own words—and the texts of the prophets for prefigurations that would allow them to “see” what the Gospels themselves did not reveal. In this way, the contemplation of scripture accomplished a kind of visualizing completion of the scriptural narrative.⁶⁷ It is not until the turn of the eleventh century, however, that we find this store of images beginning to serve as the basis of sequential devotions to Christ’s life and Passion in image and text.⁶⁸

Some three centuries previous, the Song of Songs began to fill a role with regard to Mary’s life analogous—but not identical—to that of the Passion Psalms (Psalms 21 and 56) for the life of Christ.⁶⁹ In the entirety of the Gospels, Mary spoke only six times, the last occurring at the wedding at Cana (John 2:3 and 2:5). An account of her suffering over the Passion and Crucifixion was all but entirely lacking. And yet who could have experienced these things more intensely, who could have felt them more personally, than Mary? The devotional need to know and enter into Mary’s experience became acute with the introduction of the feast of her Assumption into Heaven, which occurred in the West beginning ca. 800. The new feast became “one of the most solemn observances of the medieval church, ranking alongside Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the dedication of

⁶⁵ Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion,” 116.

⁶⁶ The foundational study is Pickering, “Crucifixion,” here p. 24. See also Marrow, *Passion Iconography*, pp. 190–205.

⁶⁷ Pickering, “Crucifixion,” pp. 233–34, 245–47, 307 and passim; Bestul, *Texts*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Marrow, *Passion Iconography*, pp. 8–9; Bestul, *Texts*, pp. 34–35; Hamburger, “Illustrated Prayer Book,” p. 184 and passim; and Constable, *Three Studies*, pp. 203–6. For indications of an earlier tradition, see Deshman, “Galba Psalter,” 118–19, 123–24.

⁶⁹ In what follows, I am summarizing Fulton’s conclusions in “Quae est ista,” and “Mimetic Devotion.”

the local sanctuary as one of the five principal celebrations of the liturgical year.⁷⁰ But there existed no *vita* and no body, no relics, textual or physical, from which to commemorate, to relive in memory, the events of Mary's death and her Assumption into Heaven. The Song of Songs, the sole scriptural dialogue between a man and a woman, allowed the development of a liturgy in which the voices of the scriptural text were understood as Mary's and Christ's, embodied in the hymns and antiphons of the chanting choir. Thus, through the language of desire of the biblical text, members of the medieval church could "hear" the words and "see" the events that transpired between the eternally suffering *sponsa derelicta* and *mater dolorosa* and her son as she was reunited with him and crowned the queen of Heaven. Words that bespoke the desire of every soul were fulfilled once and for all as the *historia* of the mother of God.

In this way, as Fulton argues, the words of the Song of Songs served the celebration of the Assumption as the "relics" of Mary's life, the *vestigia* of her path through, and passing from, this world. To know Mary's *historia* was a work of *memoria* that operated through imaginative identification, that called upon the participants to experience the truth of Mary's words by witnessing their expansion into narrative as the drama celebrated through the liturgy of her feast. In this way also, Mary's experience of the fulfilment of scriptural prophecy as life became that of the participants in the celebration: "The feast, transformed into a bridal occasion, celebrated the Incarnation of the bridegroom both in the womb of his mother-bride and in the heart of the faithful soul."⁷¹ Standing at the core of the experience was, however, not an allegorical embodiment of the collective, the church, but instead the eyewitness, "a woman, a woman who had lived and died in history."⁷² The idea of reading scriptural prophecy to recover sacred history as presence—what the fathers had done—became an act identical with Mary's experience as *sponsa et mater*, the body that bore the Word. "Mary's reading" was then an experience of truth available to every human soul.

The attempts of twelfth-century exegetes to know Mary's *historia* through the prophetic images whose truth she fulfilled thus undertook as formal exegesis what had been developing since the ninth century as the object of the experience of Mary's feast.⁷³ Mary's *historia* was now completed as Christ's had been. These two dimensions of "imagined" *historia* subsequently found a powerfully productive point of intersection in Mary's experience of Christ's Passion.⁷⁴ Some of the earliest and most influential Passion narratives are in fact Marian laments, *planctus Mariae*, that begin to appear by the mid twelfth century. Mary is interposed between the contemplative viewer and the suffering Christ to the extent

⁷⁰ Fulton, "Quae est ista," 55–56.

⁷¹ Fulton "Quae est ista," 117.

⁷² Fulton "Quae est ista," 117.

⁷³ Before Rachel Fulton's work, the Marian interpretation was generally regarded in the scholarship as simply a "type" of a primary identification between the *sponsa* and the church. Fulton has convincingly established the priority of the liturgical texts as well as their independence from the preceding commentary tradition.

⁷⁴ With this coinage "imagined" I wish to draw attention to the role of visualization in contemplation, without implying the whimsical or "unreal," as would the term "imaginary."

that what the viewer “knows” is far more Mary’s grief and compassion than the sufferings of Christ himself.⁷⁵ In these texts, Mary figures as the very source of our ability to know and, above all, to experience what happened. That is, our ability to know Christ’s suffering through scripture has been superseded by Mary’s perfect knowledge-in-the-body of all scriptural prophecy. We now experience the truth of the prophetic images not as exegetical conjecture but rather as historical narrative delivered to us by the woman “who was there.”

The history of the Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs thus exhibits the way this project of biblical exegesis related to deeply felt devotional needs and, most importantly for the idea of reading, made the Song into a dramatic performance, “a dialogue between Mary and Christ” that “could bring the worshiper into their presence, transcend time, and allow him or her to participate in their conversations.”⁷⁶ Through the Marian interpretation, the exegesis of the Song of Songs potentially opens onto and abets the development of a different kind of reading experience altogether, one focused on identification with narratives that are performed for the reader by texts, but also by pictures, and may take place as much through oral (for example, liturgical) performance as through meditative reading. The Marian trajectory became the key to a translation or recasting of the monastic reading experience of the Song into other media and for other social groups. Mary’s place in the literature (both devotional and dramatic) and iconography of the Passion represents the most prominent and influential outgrowth of this development. But, as we shall see in the later chapters of this book, the same can be found at the very centre of a new poetics of vernacular narrative.

The full potential of this narrative, experiential dimension of the images of the Song—the potential to transform the relationship between reading subject and Word—was first fully articulated, if not discovered, by Rupert of Deutz; or rather, this potential is *performed in* Rupert’s commentary on the Song of Songs as a reading act.⁷⁷ With the protagonist of this performance, at once Mary and Rupert’s feminized reading self, Rupert’s text reveals the contours of the woman in the reading mirror that later becomes the focal point of a vernacular poetics. As such it must be examined in some detail before I return, in conclusion, to its relationship to Hildegard’s audio-visual gnosis.

75 In *Stabat mater*, Andreas Kraß argues that the twelfth century constitutes the true high point of *compassio* as a devotional ideal, with Mary at its centre. The first fully developed Marian lament is the *Planctus ante nescia* of Gottfried of St Victor (d. 1194; sometimes attributed to Gottfried of Breteuil, as in Kraß, *Stabat mater*, p. 121), followed by the *Stabat mater*, which Kraß redates to the twelfth century (Kraß, *Stabat mater*, pp. 133–42), and the decisively influential *Quis dabit capiti meo* (before 1205). See also Mertens Fleury, “Klagen,” pp. 143–52; and Bestul, *Texts*, pp. 121–28.

76 Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion,” 115.

77 Rupert’s text cannot be called the first commentary devoted to a Marian interpretation. This distinction may belong to the *Sigillum beatae Mariae* of Honorius Augustodunensis, now thought to date from ca. 1100; see Flint, “Chronology,” 215–42. On Honorius’s text as a Marian commentary, see Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, pp. 251–54; Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion,” 91–93 and 102–3; *JP*, pp. 244–88; and Matter, *Song of Songs*, pp. 155–58.

Reading as Mary Did: The *De incarnatione Domini* of Rupert of Deutz

Femina mente Deum concepit, corpore Christum

Integra fudit eum nil operante viro.

(Rupert of Deutz, *CCC*, Epistula)

Reading scripture in a new way was a lifetime career for Rupert of Deutz. In fact, his commentary on the Song is one of the last works in a long list of firsts in the history of exegesis, listed by his modern biographer as follows:

The first work ever on the whole of scripture under a single theme (the work of Triune God), the first new commentary on John's Gospel since Augustine, the first new commentary on the twelve Minor Prophets since Jerome, the story of salvation narrated as an epic battle, the most innovative commentary on the Apocalypse before Joachim, and the first consistently Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs.⁷⁸

But if Rupert unlocked many new doors in the art of exegesis, he did it with only one key: he dispensed with the ossified tradition of commentary that consisted in the citation and collation of the church fathers and, with audacious and unwavering confidence, put personal inspiration in its place, his own reading experience of the text.⁷⁹ Moreover, Rupert was the first author to locate his authority to expound the meaning of scripture in visionary experience, an idea that Hildegard and Elisabeth, and after them a long line of women mystics, would shape into a rich tradition.⁸⁰ As such, and as he himself protested, he was hesitant to speak openly on the source of his knowledge.⁸¹ But the period from 1125 to 1127, the same in which he composed his commentary on the Song of Songs, saw Rupert under increasing pressure to silence critics and oblige supporters with a fuller justification of this self-acknowledged *novum*.⁸² To a great extent, the most profound and extensive answer that Rupert gave or could give on his ability to read through experience rather than through the authority of the learned doctors was his meditation on the text of the Song as an account "Of the Incarnation of God."⁸³

⁷⁸ Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, p. 372.

⁷⁹ Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, p. 129; also pp. 124–28; and Ohly, commentary to *Trudperter Hohelied*, p. 324; Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 67–72 and 345–52; Meier, "Literarische Sendung," 29–52; Haug, "Autorität," pp. 56–58.

⁸⁰ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, pp. 328–29; Dinzelbacher, *Mystik*, p. 103. See also Meier, "Literarische Sendung," 30–32, 50; Meier, "Befreiung," 267, 271, 282–83; and Powell, "Authorial Identity," pp. 267–95.

⁸¹ Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 349–50.

⁸² Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 336–52.

⁸³ Thus the title Rupert gave his text, now published as *Commentaria in Canticum Canticorum*, cited hereafter as *CCC*. Shortly afterward (ca. 1127), Rupert offered a more direct, autobiographical account, or *apologia*, in the twelfth chapter of his *De gloria*. There he made the defiant claim that "[one] visit from the Most High is worth ten such *patres*" such as his critics demanded he cite, and that "I speak and have written down [only] what comes to me from that teacher [the Holy Spirit]" (*De gloria*, p. 386).

In Rupert's reading, the entire biblical text of the Song of Songs is focused on one event: Mary's conception and bearing of the Word. Rupert takes up the idea of Mary's experience as a passage from imperfect to perfect knowledge of the Word and uses the erotic images of the Song as the key to feeling and knowing as she did. This places the life and reading of the exegete in the same position vis-à-vis the text as the one he "reads" in Mary's experience. That is, Rupert's commentary tells two *historiae*, two dramas of awakening to the Word are intertwined within it. The first recounts Mary's awakening as *prophetissa*, *mater*, and finally *magistra* or *mater ecclesiarum*. The second, parallel to hers, is that of the reader-exegete, Rupert. Both become "mouths" of scripture, able to expound its full meaning because of the reading performance that, for each, Rupert's text represents.⁸⁴ For Mary, this is accomplished in the body, as her life fulfils and manifests the scriptural images of the Song and other prophetic texts. For Rupert it is possible through Mary's body; that is, not only by reading her life as embodied truth but by repeating her own revelatory act of reading in the body.⁸⁵

The three stages of Mary's awakening correspond to her conception of the Word at the Annunciation (*prophetissa*), her own experience of the Word as flesh (*mater*), and her awakening as the fountain of all church doctrine (*mater ecclesiarum*). Rupert constructs his own "awakening" to the task of writing the commentary on the Song around three visions in the prologue, which, taken together, make clear that he is to "make the lamb with the Holy Trinity"; that is, in no uncertain terms, give the Word flesh as Mary did before him.⁸⁶ This is the Annunciation to Rupert.⁸⁷ His account of Mary's experience is thus from its inception simultaneously reading and *imitatio*, but, as the text amply reveals, this *imitatio* is not contained in the emulation of virtues or admired actions. It is a quest to know and fuse with Mary's experience in all its psycho-sexual specificity, the process whereby *he* discovers how to be *she*, in which he relives her *historia*. Rupert is fully aware of the magnitude of this claim, and far from shying away from the opportunities it offers to sensualize and eroticize reading, far from forestalling implications that point to a somatic gnosis, a knowing that resides entirely in the senses and the body, he rather orchestrates the full power of the text in service of his reading performance. One is confronted here with the force of conviction of a writer who is offering the key to his most profound creative experience.

⁸⁴ Similarly, Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion," 103–4; also in *JP*, pp. 323–36; Fulton's reading and my own of Rupert's text are highly complementary; I am grateful to her for reading and commenting on mine in 2002.

⁸⁵ Meier, "Literarische Sendung," 32 and passim, analyses Rupert's slightly later commentary on Matthew to conclude that the experiential identification between reader and work being read, between commentator and the voice of scripture, constitutes in itself Rupert's reading method and a new model of authorial consciousness of epochal significance. See also Haug, "Autorität," p. 116.

⁸⁶ "... per visum mihi dicere visa es: Pascha cum beata Trinitate facies" (*CCC*, p. 7).

⁸⁷ Cf. Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp. 65–66.

I cited earlier a passage in which Rupert saw the reading of scripture as the starting point for all knowledge of God that is accessible in this life; in the commentary on the Song of Songs, this starting point is Mary's life:

Ecce hic, o Maria beatissima, ecce hic nobis "quasi per speculum in aenigmate" subluceat vita tua, vita inclita. ... Totus fere huius capituli sensus ad illud pertinet, quod in te latet. ... Admoveamus igitur hoc speculum et diligenter oculis cordis exinde contemplemur, ut saltem aliqua ex parte cognoscamus sanctissimam conversationem tuam.⁸⁸
(CCC, p. 106)

(This, then, o most blessed Mary, this chapter [that is, Canticles 5:2–8] illuminates your life for us "as a mirror darkly" [1 Corinthians 13:12], your glorious life. ... Nearly the entire meaning of this chapter pertains to that which lies concealed in you. ... Let us approach this mirror, then, and contemplate thence lovingly with the eyes of the heart, so that we may know if only in part [cf. 1 Corinthians 13:9] your most holy life.)

This statement on Mary as mirror, which might easily have found its place at the opening of the text, Rupert reserves for the point at which she awakens to expound and teach as *mater ecclesiarum*. The reason for this delay lies in the importance that Rupert attaches to "this chapter" of the biblical text: it corresponds not only to Mary's awakening but also to his own. "This chapter" refers to the verses of Canticles 5:2–8, which recount how the bride is woken to open to her beloved and contain possibly the most intimately erotic imagery of the text. When he reaches the chapter's fourth verse, "Dilectus meus misit manum suam per foramen, et venter meus intremuit ad tactum eius" (My beloved but his hand through the opening, and my belly trembled at his touch), in one of the best known, if not fully understood, passages of his commentary, Rupert substitutes two of his own visions for an explication of the experience that is properly Mary's life—and reports them as the experiences of *quaedam adolescentularum*, "one among the young women."⁸⁹ Scholarship has long recognized that Rupert later revealed the same visions as his own experiences and as the indispensable keys to his exegetical vocation.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, this young woman is not "a certain nun"; neither does the interpolation of a young woman signal an attempt to disguise Rupert's experience as that of another. This identity rather generalizes his experience as that of an *altera Maria*, a reader and emulator of Mary's experience.⁹¹ Rupert's text takes place not only as a dialogue between Mary and Christ but also, even primarily, as a dialogue between Mary and the inquiring voice of the exegete, her emulator, whom she addresses either as one among her *adulescentulae* or as

⁸⁸ CCC, p. 106.

⁸⁹ CCC, p. 110.

⁹⁰ Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 50–53; analysed in Meier, "Literarische Sendung"; and Meier, "Befreiung."

⁹¹ Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, p. 133, took *quaedam adolescentularum* to mean "a nun." The phrase has since been consistently mistranslated or overlooked in the scholarship. For more on this point and its significance for Rupert's reading *persona*, see Powell, "Authorial Identity," pp. 285–86. The new German translation in the *Fontes Christiani* series gives "ein junges Mädchen," (p. 419), thus perpetuating the error, which follows from a failure to grasp the significance of this reading *persona* within the project of the text.

one of her *amici*. Mary thus addresses the readers and auditors just as, in the biblical text, the *sponsa* addresses the daughters of Jerusalem who accompany her search for the beloved. That is, Rupert places himself and his readers/auditors *inside* the drama of the biblical text; they are female characters and witnesses, as well as Mary's pupils and "readers."⁹² The exegete then, does not interrogate tradition or learning as to the meaning of the text. He interrogates Mary, and what she can tell him, she knows because it happened to her, and he believes because he sees and hears it—and finally because it happens to him. The *expositio mystica*, as Rupert states in his prologue, "stands more firmly," when constructed over (*superaedificata*) a foundation in the events of a certain time or identifiable facts (*historiam certi temporis vel rei demonstrabilis*). His experience vindicates the biblical text by revealing its meaning in and as *historia*.⁹³

The "young woman's" vision functions as the answer to the exegete's question to Mary:

Quomodo, o dilecta, "misit dilectus tuus manum suam per foramen"? Quae est illa "manus"? Quod est illud "foramen"? Quis ille "tactus"? Quis ille "tremor"? Quomodo "intremuit venter tuus," aut quid est venter tuus? Mirantes ista quaerimus, quia talium inexperti sumus.⁹⁴

(How, o beloved, did "your beloved put his hand through the opening"? What is this "hand"? What is this "opening"? What the "touch"? What the "tremor"? How did "your belly tremble," or what is your belly? We ask this in wonder, for we are without experience of anything comparable.)

The concluding statement is then at least implicitly denied by the answer, as Rupert reports that *nostra aetate* (in our time), "The young woman, that is, the soul devoted to these nuptials and earnest in these wedding songs, was recalling the same [verses]," when she had a half-waking experience on her bed that reduplicates all the queried particulars of the biblical text.⁹⁵ There is no further response, either from Mary or the exegete, none, that is, but the second "vision" Rupert relates (*non vana visio*, as he states, but rather a somatic experience), in which the same *tremor* was felt again, this time as an experience of bodily fusion with the crucified Christ, "so that mouth seemed moved to mouth, her whole body to his body."⁹⁶ This second vision, beyond being reported elsewhere as the crucial turning point that enabled Rupert to write, recalls the opening of both the commentary and the biblical text, in which Mary experiences "the kiss of his

⁹² With this technique Rupert is continuing a tradition that goes back at least as far as Origen; see Robertson, *Lectio divina*, pp. 165–69.

⁹³ CCC, p. 8.

⁹⁴ CCC, p. 110.

⁹⁵ In view of the confusion over this passage as only just discussed, it is best to clarify: I am conflating two successive paragraphs of the text here, the first beginning "Nostra aetate, quaedam adulescentularum ..." and then making a first account of the experience; the second beginning "Memorabat etiam eadem adulescentula, scilicet anima nuptiis istis dedita canticisque nuptialibus intenta, quoniam dilectus in visu noctis," which further develops the same "vision" (it is, properly speaking, rather an experience of *unio mystica*). Cf. CCC, p. 110.

⁹⁶ "... ita ut os quoque ori, totumque corpus admotum videretur eius corpori," CCC, p. 111.

mouth" (Canticles 1:1) as the moment of the conception.⁹⁷ The two visions together, then, show the emulating reader having completed, as visionary experience, the same development revealed as Mary's by the biblical text. "Reading Mary" is not so much exegesis as it is a psychosomatic *imitatio*. The reading exegete seeks identity with Mary, fusion with her experience, which he knows not through the Gospel but through the fusion of the letter—the sensual images of the Song—with the gloss, her life. What Rupert reveals in this text as Mary's experience—and Rachel Fulton has called "the story of Mary's contemplative development and visionary birth, of her awakening as the scriptural exegete *par excellence*"—is thus also always implicitly his.⁹⁸ In this way, Rupert's commentary relates the drama "Of the Incarnation of God" as the beginning of a new gnosis, and this new gnosis, Mary's reading, is the foundation of his vocation as scriptural exegete.

The commentary begins with the moment that is the key to its own existence, the Annunciation to Mary, understood both as an intensely physical experience and as the fusion of letter and gloss, prophetic image and life:

"Osculetur me osculo oris sui." Quae est ista exclamatio tam magna, tam repentina? O beata Maria, inundatio gaudii, vis amoris, torrens voluptatis, totam te operuit totam te obtinuit penitusque inebriavit, et sensisti "quod oculos non vidit et auris non audivit et in cor hominis non ascendit," et dixisti: "Osculetur me osculo oris sui." Dixisti enim ad angelum: "Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum."⁹⁹

("Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth" [Canticles 1:1]. What is this exclamation, so great and so unexpected? O, blessed Mary, the floodwaters of joy, the force of love, a torrent of pleasure filled you totally, possessed you totally, intoxicated you completely, and you felt "what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, and what has never entered into the heart of man" [1 Corinthians 2:9], and you spoke: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!" You spoke to the angel, indeed, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word" [Luke 1:38].)

Rupert's opening takes the image of the Song as an intensified expression of Mary's words as reported by the Gospel, their meaning is "the same," and both equally describe an experience, which, in itself, reveals their equivalence to Mary alone:

Nonne sensus idem est in verbis seu vocibus diversis? Sicut audisti et credidisti, sicut tibimet imprecando dixisti, "fiat mihi," ita et factum est tibi. Deus Pater te osculatus est "osculo oris sui." Quis oculus hoc vidit? quae auris audivit? cuius in cor hominis ascendit? Tibi autem, o Maria, semetipsum revelavit, et osculans, et osculum, et os osculantis.¹⁰⁰

(Is this not the same meaning in different words and voices? Just as you heard and you believed, just as you, beseeching yourself said, "let it be unto me," just so it was done to

⁹⁷ In his slightly later commentary on Matthew, Rupert makes a seemingly contrite admission of a "foolish sentiment" that had led him earlier to "transfigure the narrative so as better to speak the truth, and yet not allow the person to be recognized" (*De gloria*, pp. 394–95); see Powell, "Authorial Identity," pp. 281–87; and Meier, "Literarische Sendung," pp. 29–52. See also notes 83 and 85, above.

⁹⁸ Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion," 94.

⁹⁹ CCC, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ CCC, p. 10.

you. God [the] Father kissed you “with the kiss of his mouth.” Who has ever seen this kiss? what ear heard it? into whose human heart has it ever ascended? But to you, o Mary, he revealed himself, the kisser, the kiss, and the mouth that kisses.)

In this moment, “when He with that vehement love and through the Holy Spirit implanted the substance of his Word deep in your heart, in your womb,” Mary was granted full knowledge of scripture.¹⁰¹ Having first immersed himself in Mary’s experience of the moment, the kiss, Rupert turns to its significance with the next verse, “Quia sunt meliora ubera tua vino” (How much better is the milk of your breasts than wine) (Canticles 1:2). In the kiss of the conception, Mary was nursed from the two breasts of the Holy Spirit. The first is man’s redemption and had never been drunk of before (the New Testament), and the other nursed the prophets and produced the miracles of the Old Testament.¹⁰² As he elaborates somewhat further on, “all prophets were born out in you, because in your feeling as ‘the Holy Spirit came upon you’ all prophecies and scriptures were conjoined with it.”¹⁰³

Elsewhere, as we have seen, Mary is the *speculum* that is also scripture; she is also called “secretarium omnium Scripturarum sanctarum” (the secret receptacle of all holy scriptures).¹⁰⁴ This kiss, unheard and unseen by any but Mary, is nevertheless that experienced later in the text by the emulating *adulescentula*. And here, too, while he uses an allegorical referent for the images of the text, Rupert insists on their physical realization as a woman’s experience. The moment is still emphatically that of the Annunciation seen as conception, and the experience of the milk is a drinking in the womb, a gnostic counterpart of sexual intercourse:

Utrorumque huiuscemodi uberum laetificata dulcedine ineffabili, dum concipis, o virgo beata, ... quibus duabus clausulis iam dicta significantur duo data eiusdem Spiritus sancti, quid aliud diceret, nisi quia “meliora sunt ubera tua vino, fragrantia unguentis optimis?” Non fueras experta vinum huius saeculi, vinum voluptatis carnalis, sine cuius ebrietate nulla umquam mulier praeter te concipere potuit aut poterit, et tamen diiudicare nosti quam melior aut vehementior, dulcior atque fortior esset voluptas sive amor Dei, in quo concepisti, sine dubio potata illius torrente voluptatis.¹⁰⁵

(Having been nursed by each of these breasts in unspeakable sweetness when you conceived, o, blessed virgin, ... when these two things had been spoken, which signified the same two gifts of the Holy Spirit, what else could you say, if not, “Your breasts are sweeter than wine, and their fragrance surpasses all precious ointments” [Canticles 1:1–2]? You had no experience of the wine of this world, the wine of carnal pleasure, without whose intoxication no woman before you was able to conceive, nor ever will conceive; and yet you knew to judge how much better, how much more vehement, how much sweeter and more powerful was the desire, or love of God, in which you conceived, once having drunk of the “torrent of that desire” [Psalms 36:9, 35:9].)

101 “... dum substantiam Verbi sui cum illo amore suo Spiritu sancto tuae menti, tuo ventri penitus insereret” (CCC, p. 11).

102 CCC, pp. 11–12.

103 “Immo prophetae omnes ad te accesserunt, quia prophetiae omnium et Scripturae omnes in tuum sensum cum superveniente in te Spiritu sancto convenerunt” (CCC, p. 12; see also p. 147).

104 CCC, p. 89.

105 CCC, p. 12.

The difficulty of translating *voluptas* with one term in this passage—I have used “pleasure” as well as “desire”—is possibly due to a play on yet another meaning of the word: male semen.¹⁰⁶ But the pun would only enhance an identification otherwise completed in the text. Rupert is describing a moment in which scriptural images—words of the prophets such as those of Solomon’s Song—fused with physical experience in the same way and at the same time as the love of God (*voluptas Dei*) fused with the flesh of Mary’s womb. The intensity with which the exegete explores the physical dimensions of both image and event, letter and gloss, witnesses him seeking to know the experience in which Mary became, as she is named here, *prophetissa*. Like the visual portrayal of the Annunciation beginning around the same time and like Aelred after him, Rupert cites Isaiah’s prophecy in connection with this moment, but he opts for a variation of it that occurs one chapter later in the biblical text: *Et accessi ad prophetissam, et concepit et peperit filium* (And I approached the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son) (Isaiah 8:3).¹⁰⁷ The emphasis for Rupert is displaced from the virginal birth to the way in which Mary “became a prophet.”

At his point, Mary herself is still silent, her experience ineffable, and the “kiss” cannot be communicated. When Rupert returns to the moment of the conception a second time (to be discussed shortly), Mary as *mater* will speak her own experience to the *amici*, her reading emulators and initiates.¹⁰⁸ Finally—after Rupert’s text has reached its crucial midpoint (“Ecce in medio nuptiarum sumus”),¹⁰⁹ and thus passed from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy to proclamation of New Testament doctrine—Mary will “awaken” to her calling as exegete with the words “ego os meum aperui in doctrina” (I opened my mouth to teach).¹¹⁰ The kiss itself will be felt again “nostra aetate” by the “young woman” who is Rupert as Mary’s reader. At this juncture of the text, then, the exegete and Mary fuse, her experience is knowable to him, or “her.” More properly, the hermeneutic distance between letter and gloss has been collapsed and with it the difference between his reading self and hers. But Rupert’s text does not content itself with the justification of one inspired career. It constructs Mary’s moment of conception and *cognition* as the redemption of the body and bodily vehicles of knowledge, that is, as a new *lectio* in which the body can both perceive and reveal the Word.

Rupert’s identity as *adulescentula* in the text is far more than a convenient way to project himself into the drama of the Song. This feminine reading identity is the key to understanding how his visionary authority as exegete could become a model of an alternative, women’s, or “illiterate’s” gnosis. He introduces his female persona as the “immature soul” (*anima imperfecta*), and as she “whose education is not

¹⁰⁶ Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, p. 2013; Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin–Français*, p. 860.

¹⁰⁷ CCC, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ The *amici* are identified as the prophets and apostles (cf. CCC, p. 55)—that is, as the voices of scripture. But as with the daughters of Jerusalem, the way Mary and Christ address them, explaining their words, puts them in a position indistinguishable from that of the audience.

¹⁰⁹ CCC, p. 85.

¹¹⁰ CCC, p. 112.

yet complete.”¹¹¹ The term *adulescentula* is generally identifiable with a position of weakness and insufficiency before God—the same position then, that Hildegard renames as *paupercula feminea forma*. Elsewhere, for purposes of contrasting his personally inspired exegesis to the learned methods that he rejected, Rupert was fond of characterizing himself as an *indoctus*. For him this term meant “untutored monk” as opposed to licensed schoolman or *doctor*.¹¹² Speaking of the formal intellectual training of the schools that others had pursued and he himself lacked, Rupert wrote to Abbot Cuno in 1125, “I did none of all this; instead I was like the simple Jacob who stayed at home with his mother.”¹¹³ The fact that prominent *doctores* such as William of Champeaux and Anselm of Laon were among his most tenacious detractors lent dramatic force to this self-image.

Rupert was in reality by no means unlearned; the *indoctus* served him as it served others, as a claim to personal inspiration through the Spirit. But Rupert took this claim much further than his predecessors in that he used it not as a topos of modesty or authenticity—not as a way, that is, to reinforce his position within tradition, but rather as a way of introducing a voice from outside it. As such, the topos alone was not sufficient to his claim of inspiration through personal visionary experience. In the *adulescentula* of the Song of Songs, an immature female who witnesses Mary’s original reading in the body, he constructed a new basis for his claim, one that is intrinsically appropriate to his exegetical project, because it appropriates Mary’s experience of the Incarnation as the authority for a direct knowledge of the Word that is free of “learned intervention,” *because it is female*.

In the prologue, Rupert traces his inspiration to undertake the task at hand to an experience from his youth in which knowledge of Mary’s accomplishment is revealed to him by the Spirit when “a whistling breath of air blowing in both ears, faster than can be described, placed [*deposuit*] these verses in me”:¹¹⁴ “Femina mente Deum concepit, corpore Christum / Integra fudit eum nil operante viro” (A woman conceived God in her soul, Christ in her body / Intact she brought him forth without male intervention) (CCC, p. 6). These verses mention neither the Song of Songs nor Mary by name. They instead contrast a woman’s knowledge of the Word, simultaneous in spirit and body, with “male intervention.” As noted earlier, the final vision reported in the prologue sees Mary summoning Rupert to repeat her own miraculous bearing of Christ the Lamb. Rupert’s initial auditory experience, on the other hand, collapses the idea of prophetic inspiration as a breath of air (cited from the experience of Elias in 3 Kings 19:12) with that of the *conceptio per aurem*.¹¹⁵ A patristic sermon, for example, evoked the latter with

111 CCC, pp. 13, 119; see also p. 138. The first instance follows from the introduction of the *adulescentulae* in the biblical text at Canticles 1:2, *ideo adulescentulae dilexerunt te*.

112 Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz*, pp. 347–48; Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, pp. 121–24.

113 *Deutsche Mystikerbriefe*, p. 32.

114 “... et ecce quasi sibilus aurae tenuis (3 Kings 19:12) per utramque aurem transcurrens, velocius quam dici possit, istos in me versiculos deposuit” (CCC, p. 6).

115 The idea that Mary conceived through God’s breath, or a wind, also had its tradition and could be assimilated to the *conceptio per aurem*; see Jones, “Empfängnis”; and Hirn, *Sacred Shrine*, pp. 297–99; also below, pp. 238–39.

these words: "Oh blessed Virgin ... made mother without the coupling of man. For here the ear was the wife, and the angelic word the husband."¹¹⁶ The inspiration for Rupert's account would appear to lie in similar verses extolling Mary's conception through the ear, while transferring the receptive act to his own audition.

The verses placed in Rupert's creative "womb" thus not only described the miracle of Mary's unaided conception of the Word but also his own calling to expound on scripture, most specifically, to bring forth the "flesh" of Mary's experience from the images of the Song of Songs.¹¹⁷ Where the idea at stake is this vocation, the opposition between Mary's experience of the Word and that effected by the intervention of man is manifest as one between divine inspiration—Rupert's experience—and human learning. The *adulescentula* thus provides Rupert with the perfect position to describe his reading self vis-à-vis Mary. He is an "imperfect" or "immature" version of herself, the gender reversal makes Mary's teaching in the emotionally and sexually charged images of women's physical experience specifically appropriate not only to what he knows (his circumvention of learning or reading through previous authorities) but also to how "she" knows (a different, bodily gnosis). Rupert's new gnosis is thus female *sui generis*, in its beginning as in its end, in its relationship to learning, to the body, and to God.¹¹⁸

The *adulescentula*, marked as the female soul not suited to the man's learning and spiritual strength, learns from Mary because Mary's way of knowing redeemed her entire sex. When the *prophetissa* becomes the *mater* and first speaks herself of the ineffable to her *amici*, she proclaims women's redemption in the same breath as she proclaims the fulfilment of the prophetic letter in her experience:

O amici, hoc ego experta sum. Humilitatem meam de illo accubitu suo sensit et respexit et valde delectatus est et placuit sibi, quod in isto sexu tantam humilitatem invenit: in isto, inquam sexu, a quo initium superbiæ generi humano superveniens totam massam corrupit.

(CCC, p. 30)

(O my friends, this I have experienced. From where he reclined on his couch he perceived and gave heed to the scent of my humility, and truly he was delighted and it pleased him that in that sex such humility should be found: in that same sex, I say, from which *superbia* sprang, thence to overcome and corrupt the whole body of the human race.)

¹¹⁶ "O Virgo benedicta ... mater effecta absque alicujus viri copulatione. Ibi enim auricula uxor fuit, angelicus autem sermo maritus exstitit" (PL 65:98), attributed to Eleutherius of Tournai, as cited in Jones, "Empfängnis," p. 153.

¹¹⁷ Similarly, *JP*, p. 338.

¹¹⁸ Powell, "Authorial Identity," pp. 285–87. This becomes only more apparent in the commentary on Matthew, where Rupert mobilizes a still more explicit account of his "coupling" with the Word—including an insemination of the *uterus animae* and a joining of reclining bodies, in which a male form lowers itself in a dream onto the visionary and presses itself upon him like a seal upon wax, perceived as a drunkenness in love (*viva et vera voluptas*). See Meier, "Literarische Sendung," 39–44, esp. 42–43, who notes that the dates of the visions undoubtedly coincide with Rupert's work on the Song commentary; and *JP*, pp. 309–14. I cannot follow Fulton's determination to render the experience somehow genderless (*JP*, pp. 336–40).

Letter becomes life in Mary's body, as she emphatically proclaims with the words "ego experta sum."¹¹⁹ Mary is speaking here of the conception, seen to correspond to the words of Canticles 1:11: *nardus mea dedit odorem suum*. Here and elsewhere in Rupert's text, Mary's experience is referred to her sex specifically. She reverses the fall of the body in Eve, and the reversal corresponds to a redemption not only of humanity but also of woman's body and of woman as body. This *factum*, proclaimed in its theological import here, is evident on every level of Rupert's project: the identification sought with the images as a woman's physical experience, the doubling of the "literal" meaning as bodily experience both in letter and gloss, the claim to gnosis through a fusion with this same literal physicality. But most of all it is evident in the way the fulfilment of the *sponsa as mater*, the transformation of a woman's body as a life-giving act, corresponds both to the fulfilment of this text as life and to the knowing of all scripture in the body. Thus Mary explains to her *amici*, Rupert and his readers or auditors, the prophetic knowledge she received with the conception of Christ:

Prophetissa namque eram, et ex quo mater eius facta sum, scivi eum ista passurum. Cum igitur carne mea taliter progenitum, talem filium sinu meo foverem, ulnis gestarem, uberibus lactarem, et talem eius futuram mortem semper prae oculis haberem, et prophetica, immo plus quam prophetica mente praeviderem, qualem, quantam, quam prolixa, me putatis materni doloris pertulisse passionem? Hoc est quod dico: "Fasciculus myrrhae dilectus meus mihi, inter ubera commorabitur." O commoratio, dulcis quidem, sed plena gemitibus inenarrabilibus!

(CCC, p. 32)

(For I was a prophetess, and from the moment that I was made his mother, I knew he was going to suffer these things. When, therefore, I fondled such a son, born of my flesh, at my bosom, carried him in my arms, nursed him at my breasts, and had always before my eyes such a death as was destined for him, and foresaw everything with a prophetic, nay rather, a more than prophetic mind; what kind, how much, and how extensive a passion of maternal grief, do you imagine me to have endured? This is what I mean when I say: "A bundle of myrrh is my beloved is to me; he shall abide between my breasts" [Canticles 1:12]. O sojourn sweet indeed, but filled with unutterable groanings!)¹²⁰

Mary speaks, here and throughout, in the past tense of her own experience, which puts her in the present of the reader who seeks to know that experience. This fact, coupled with the physical and emotional intimacy that Mary offers her *adulescentulae*, renders complex ideas of theology and gnosis as a mother would initiate her daughter into the heights and depths of intrinsically female experience. Mary's intervention in the text is not only drama, it is also method, and one conceived around the "female" position of her pupil.

¹¹⁹ A later passage is more explicit. Speaking to Christ of an Old Testament passage just cited (Genesis 19:26), Mary says, "Quam veraciter ille te appellaverit desiderium, ego maxime in visceribus meis experta sum, et hoc amicis est intimandum" (I have experienced in my flesh and blood the truth of his words when he called you [the bridegroom] the object of desire, and this must be made known to [our] followers) (CCC, p. 56). Mary then speaks to the *amici* and the *filiae Hierusalem* of the desire that is also theirs. On Rupert's corresponding use of *expertus sum* and *experimentum*, see McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, p. 328; and Miquel, "Expérience spirituelle," pp. 56–58.

¹²⁰ Trans. slightly modified from Astell, *Song of Songs*, p. 64.

In passages such as the above Mary teaches the reading exegete how to read her life by evoking as if in pictures the actions that constitute her fulfilment of the biblical text. These pictures of her experience, and the narrative and emotional context they evoke, are redistilled into the images of the biblical text and thus recommended to her emulating reader, who can become Mary through meditation on them, through “reading” the images of the Song as the vestiges of her own reading life. The same connection Rupert makes here between the *fasciculus myrrhae* and the “picture” of Mary holding in her arms simultaneously her infant son and the crucified Christ grew into an independent complex of image and text that continued to inspire meditational texts, devotional images, and combinations of the two, including the figure known to art history as the *pietà*, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.¹²¹ The image aims at a moment of loving identification with suffering that corresponds to Christ’s own descent and wounding in love to redeem mankind. Mary as *sponsa derelicta* and *mater dolorosa* teaches this moment of identification with her narrative experience, distilled into an image. We will encounter a translation of the same image into vernacular narrative that is also profoundly aware of its significance as a woman’s gnosis in the final chapters of this book on Wolfram’s *Parzival*. The woman as a focus for identification in suffering and love, whose “reading” act can motivate God’s loving descent into the bride: this is likewise the same woman that Chrétien de Troyes places at the beginning and end of Yvain’s narrative path.

Another image of woman as “reader,” one that identifies her sooner with the opposite pole, Eve, explicitly makes her into a viewer whose desiring gaze is the starting point for her transformation into Mary. Mary as *magistra magistrorum* recommends this reading position explicitly to her *adulescentulae* as the image of a woman seduced by a picture. They are to imitate the biblical whore Ooliba, the woman whose lust for the forms she sees painted on the wall led her to take their living counterparts as lovers (Ezekiel 23:14–17). The response of Mary’s followers is not a different one, it is only properly directed to a different image:

Non, inquam, talis pictura haec, verumtamen aemulamini in melius visum illum et concupiscentiam illam. ... Et ego vobis dico: Sicut illa videlicet non Hierusalem, sed Ooliba, exhibuit oculos suos videre viros depictos in pariete, videre imagines Chaldeorum expressas coloribus, videre balteos eorum, tiaras eorum et formam eorum, ita nunc exhibete oculos vestros, oculos interiores, videre dilectum hunc, videre aureum caput eius, nitentes oculos eius reverendas genas eius, candida et gratiosa labia eius, tornatiles et aureas manus eius, eburneum et sapphiris distinctum ventrem eius, rectissima crura eius, et tangite suauissimum guttur eius, iuxta illud: “Gustate et videte, quoniam suavis est Dominus.”

(CCC, p. 130)

(Not, I tell you, before a picture such as this, but indeed before a better you should emulate her same gaze and desire. ... And I say to you: even as that woman—not Hierusalem but Ooliba—opened her eyes to see men depicted on a wall, to see the images of the Chaldeans expressed in painted colours, to see their belts, their crowns, and their bodily beauty [cf. Ezekiel 23:14–15], so now you: open your eyes, you interior eyes, to see this beloved, to see his golden head, his brilliant eyes, his awe-inspiring cheeks, his radiant

121 Schawe, “Pietà und Hoheslied,” 161–212.

and glorious lips, his smooth and golden hands, his ivory stomach set with sapphires, his upright legs. And touch his throat, surpassingly sweet, in accord with the words: "Taste and see how sweet the Lord is" [Psalm 33:9].¹²²

Rupert is not only reading according to his own inspiration here; he is also expressly reversing precedent: Origen, too, had briefly evoked Ooliba's response in connection with the reading of the Song, but as a negative counter-example.¹²³ For Rupert, Ooliba's lust is the way Mary instructs her reading daughters to emulate her own life. Ooliba is to the reader's objective as Eve is to Mary. While Mary reverses the seduction of Eve by seducing the bridegroom with her humility, this fact takes place and is made known to her followers in the language of human erotic love. That is, Mary's reading relives, transforms, and thus redeems the seduction of Eve. The reader/auditor, the *adulescentula*, seeks identification with Mary, but the means and capacity to do so she inherits from Eve/Ooliba, the woman as symbol of the flesh seduced. The woman-as-reader is suspended between opposite manifestations of the identification between women and flesh, Eve and Mary, and seeks to approach the latter by adopting and redirecting the response of the former. *Sacra pagina* becomes an act of visual contemplation, sensory and sensual desire, authorized by a female experience of the Word, reading as Mary did.

Rupert's text thus displays a tendency to open onto a devotional practice focused on images both as visible and physical experience and as moments of a narrative development, and it is important to emphasize the way this moment in devotional aesthetics emerges inextricably bound to the idea of Mary's experience as a woman's reading. As a reading identity, Rupert's *adulescentula* represents the conflation of a series of dualistic oppositions that formed the hierarchical scaffolding of medieval thinking about knowledge and its acquisition. These constellate around three related notions: the capacity for and extent of learning, the limits of human knowledge of God, and the place of humanity before God. As seen in the [first chapter](#), the *indoctus*, the *illitteratus*, and the *laicus* are all potentially facets of the negatively marked pole of the first opposition, that between learned and unlearned. The immaturity that is emphasized in Rupert's use of the *adulescentula*, however, sooner recalls his own repeated citation of Paul's words from first Corinthians on *perfecta* and *imperfecta cognitio*, knowledge of God gained face to face as opposed to that available in this life, which is received *per speculum in enigmate*, "through a glass in a dark manner."¹²⁴ Paul equated perfect (and unattainable) knowledge with the man, *vir*, and imperfect knowledge with the child, *parvulus*.¹²⁵ Finally, as I have argued here, Rupert identifies most strongly not solely with the *adulescentula*'s

¹²² Trans. slightly modified from Astell, *Song of Songs*, p. 69.

¹²³ Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp. 69–70.

¹²⁴ Rupert cites 1 Corinthians 13:9–12 seven times in all, five times in the fifth book alone, which recounts Mary's awakening as exegete.

¹²⁵ "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, that which is imperfect shall be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away the things of a child" (1 Corinthians 13:9–11).

immaturity but also with her gender; the figure perfectly accomplishes the jump from Paul's opposition to that between man and woman, or between Rupert and Mary. This last opposition takes the duality beyond the realms of learning and social status and into an ontological field in which the woman's position corresponds to the flesh as opposed to the spirit and to the body as opposed to the mind.

All three of these metaphorical fields meet in the idea of bodily vehicles of knowledge. The woman who is flesh is seen as limited to "non-cognitive" or "non-intellectual" ways of knowing; she must learn through the body, identified with images and personal experience, pictures and narrative. The *laicus* and *illitteratus* likewise learn through "the eyes and ears," that is, by example, through pictures and others' oral explanations, means that are "sensory" as opposed to the intellectual means of the literate and cleric. Paul's *speculum* was the favourite medieval image for knowledge gained through the natural, visible world and became the characteristic justification for bestiaries and other compendia of natural lore as well as justifying the place of pictures in these and other works.¹²⁶ That is, seen through the question of reading, of man's ability to know the divine, these three oppositions always potentially overlap, a fact that affords the opportunity to mix and match their terms wherever a common denominator is at stake. This is the possibility of which Rupert avails himself so as to equate Mary's role in the Incarnation with his own vocation to read scripture: once both are understood as ways of "knowing the Word," slippage and fusion can occur between other potential identities on the same side of the different oppositions. The same possibility invites the paradoxical identification of Hildegard as *laica et illiterata*: as a woman, she cannot be *clericus*. But Hildegard's fate also exhibits the double jeopardy in the woman's position: while the *illitteratus* or the *indoctus* might represent a stage of individual development, potentially to be surpassed, the woman's relationship to the man's knowledge was not one of lack of training but rather of incapacity; her position depends not on education but on her state of being.

What we encounter in Rupert's use of the *adulescentula* as a figure through which to engage in *imitatio* of Mary's experience—and in the embodiment of this same figure in Hildegard, to be examined shortly—is the point at which the articulation of reading and gnosis, or a redefinition of the relationship between reading subject and Word, meets and becomes co-generative with a new theology of the body and the flesh that, as Caroline Bynum's work has amply demonstrated, formed the foundation of late-medieval religiosity and shaped the development of women's spirituality, in particular as visionary and mystical experience.¹²⁷ Bynum's work focuses on an opportunity discovered in the extension of the opposition between man and woman as spirit and flesh to that between God and humanity. The Incarnation itself demonstrated that God could dispense neither with woman nor with flesh to assume human form and redeem humanity, and the twelfth century—Bynum locates the beginnings of these developments in the writings of

¹²⁶ On the use of the passage to justify new media in instruction see Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 377–83 and 424–25; and Wenzel, *Spiegelungen*, esp. pp. 64–96.

¹²⁷ See the essays collected in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*; and Bynum, *Holy Feast*.

Bernard of Clairvaux and other Cistercians among men, and in Hildegard's and Elisabeth's writing among women—witnessed the discovery of this idea as a way of exploring the human aspect of Christ. Christ's flesh, his woman-self, was humanity's way of knowing him. Thus, men, to identify with their own redemption, identified with the feminine as a reversal of their symbolic selves as man, spirit, and intellect. As Bynum puts it, "the image of both sinful and saved humanity is the image of woman."¹²⁸ Both woman and flesh undergo a revaluation and even a value inversion as the possible and indispensable medium of divine will: just as God required the vessel of woman's, Mary's, body to take human form; so humanity as God's flesh is afforded the possibility of epiphany in the body. But woman is body and thus cannot know the Spirit except through this exemption, through the flesh. Woman thus becomes a symbol of an imperative integration of the life of the flesh into that of the spirit, for which the authority is found in the Incarnation and the model is Mary's experience. In Rupert's use of a feminine persona, *Maria imperfecta*, as double of his own reading identity and a model offered readers and auditors of his text, the same understanding redeems the faculties of sensory knowing along with the corporeal vehicles of knowledge. Mary is the body as woman, as image, as letter, as reader and as the flesh of Christ; all collapse into one moment of perfect knowing that her life represents.

Reading as the Bride Embodied: Hildegard and Her "Publicists"

Hildegard's awakening as *prophetissa* is the same awakening Rupert sees revealed in Mary's life as the Bride of the Word. As she stated repeatedly, her gift was one of reading, of knowledge of the full meaning of scripture: "I know then by the book the interior meaning of the explication of the Psalter, the Gospels and other scriptures, which is demonstrated to me through this vision that touches me in heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me the depths of meaning."¹²⁹ The *paupercula feminea forma* who penetrates to the deepest meaning of scripture "sine ulla humana doctrina" or "absque doctrina ullius hominis" is a reading identity that follows precisely in the footsteps Rupert set out before her.¹³⁰ With the circumlocution of her sex, Hildegard identifies her prophetic persona with the female principle as manifestation of the divine (as the Spirit put it for Rupert: "Woman conceived God in her soul, Christ in her body"), and her claim to have no experience of human learning is a claim to educational virginity that, from the position of bodily identity with the female that distinguishes her from Rupert, does not renounce the learned male but rather states the facts of her biography: "sicut indocta mulier me docuerat."¹³¹ The equivalence between the three positions, Mary's, Rupert's, and Hildegard's, only eludes modern sensibility because the common denominator

¹²⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 265; see also pp. 267–68. The point is also emphasized by Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp. 6–7.

¹²⁹ *Epistolarium*, 1, p. 4; see also *Scivias*, 1, p. 4. For the *vita*, see above, p. 38.

¹³⁰ *Vita Hildegardis*, 2.2, p. 128 (s.a. p. 38, above).

¹³¹ *Vita Hildegardis*, 2.2, p. 128.

between them, reading, has shrunk in the succeeding millennium from its scope as a metaphor for all human knowledge of the divine to the mere decoding of written signs and interpretation of texts.

The Incarnation is the mystical centre and eternal wellspring of Hildegard's theology.¹³² Mary's role as model and originator of her ability to know and bear the Word is nonetheless somewhat elusive in her works, but this is only because it is suffused into her creative process and pervades her complex imagery in ways that are not demonstrative but experiential. There are as yet few studies that attempt to grasp Hildegard's oeuvre through the interrelationship of music, text, image, and voice that made up the experience at which all her creative production aims. In her attempt to relate these different dimensions as they are found in the *Scivias* and the *Ordo virtutum*—a work that, as a fully staged drama, realizes the otherwise implicit dimension of performance—Margot Fassler has shown how this process of suffusion of a central, generative image—in this case, that of the Tree of Jesse as a figure of the Incarnation—could, for those who both performed and witnessed these texts in their monastic lives, accomplish a transformational experience in which they “lived” the truth of the mystery that the image expressed.¹³³ In this specific sense, Hildegard recreated the experience of Marian *imitatio* as the formative centre of the spiritual identity of her community and as an experience of presence in performance. This latter conclusion only appears to go against the grain of the view that Hildegard was little concerned with Mary's person, with the events of her life as a focus for devotion. As Barbara Newman observes, Hildegard's disregard for the human biography of Mary was only a way of affirming the supreme and all-encompassing importance of her transformative act: the Incarnation.¹³⁴ Bynum argues that this focus is the way to grasp the importance of Mary not only to Hildegard but to medieval women's spirituality generally.¹³⁵ And, indeed, Rupert's understanding of Mary's significance not only fertilized Hildegard's imagination but also became, through the *Speculum virginum*, fundamental to a universal model of women's monastic, reading lives.

These larger developments are examined further in the [next chapter](#). My concern in the remainder of this one is to show first how Hildegard communicated her creative activity as a reincarnation of Mary's and then how readily the same idea was taken up by her admirers and even explicitly referred to the model to which it was indebted, Rupert's awakening as exegete through Mary's experience.

As suggested above, Hildegard suffuses the identity between her prophetic persona and Mary's bearing of the Word into the imagery of her texts. Thus, one of the most telling testimonies to this identification occurs embedded in a threefold “annunciation” from God at the beginning of the third part of *Scivias*. In the first instance, God, speaking through a male figure seated on a throne, renews his command that she “Write what

132 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 156–95 and passim.

133 Fassler, “Composer,” p. 161 and passim; s.a. Holsinger, *Music*, pp. 87–136.

134 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 159–60; 187–88.

135 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 269.

you see and hear.” Hildegard, characteristically, humbly protests her unworthiness, and pleads that he first

grant me the understanding that will enable me to give these mystical things recountable form [*ennarrabiliter proferre*] ... strengthen me in the dawn light of your justice, in which your Son became manifest, and show me in what way I can and how I should bring forth [*proferre*] the divine plan that was concluded in eternal wisdom, how you wanted that same Son to be incarnated. ... You determined before all Creation in your simplicity and in the fire of the Holy Spirit that your Son should rise up like a radiant sun in the morning of virginity and truly, for the sake of humanity, take on the garment of humanity and human form.¹³⁶

That is, the key to fulfilling her commission is a complete knowledge of the mystery of the Incarnation, an ability to bring forth mystical truth in narrative form. The “dawn light” that Hildegard evokes is a characteristic image in her work for Mary at the moment of the conception and as the feminine principle that gave birth to the son; it is no less, however, an image of the bride from the Song of Songs.¹³⁷ The dawn light runs through this “annunciation” as a leitmotif that accomplishes the identification—as seen through the eyes of God—of Hildegard with Mary. The second iteration, which follows immediately the reply just given, offers a rare acknowledgement of the scriptural archetype of the image: “Et iterum audiui eum dicentem mihi: ‘O quam pulchri sunt oculi tui in divina narratione, dum ibi surgit aurora in divino consilio!’” (And I heard him speak to me again: “O how beautiful your eyes are when you recount things divine and the dawn light arises there in the divine plan!”)¹³⁸ The words collate language from several verses of the Song of Songs—4:14, 2:1, and 6:9—such that Hildegard, Mary, and the bride become one in a visual moment extolled by the voice, which, thus inspired, descends and fills Hildegard with its light as it once filled Mary in her conception of the Word. Hildegard does not generally display a preference for citation from the Song of Songs to describe her place before God, but she is, all the more so, the bride of God even as Mary was; the language that describes the bride’s experience is fused with the creative process that brings forth her work.

Hildegard then responds with a renewed and more extended expression of her unworthiness, to which the voice, concluding the discussion, commands,

Speak now, as you have been taught. It is because you are nothing but ashes that I want you to speak. Speak the revelation of the Bread that is the son of God. ... He himself begins to stir as sanctity in the human person before it fully awakens within her. For this reason

136 “... ut mihi des intellectum, quatenus possim ennarrabiliter proferre haec mystica ... confirma me in aurora iustitiae, in qua manifestatus est Filius tuus, et da mihi quomodo possim et qualiter debeam proferre divinum consilium quod in antiquo consilio ordinatum est, quomodo eundem Filium tuum voluisti incarnari ... hoc volens ante omnem creaturam in simplicitate tua et in igne columbae scilicet Spiritus sancti, ut idem Filius tuus quasi splendida solis forma mirabiliter surgens in incipiente capite virginis veraciter indueretur humanitate sumpta hominis forma propter hominem” (*Scivias* 3.1, p. 329).

137 Gössmann, *Verkündigung*, p. 114; Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, p. 166; Fassler, “Composer,” p. 166.

138 *Scivias*, 3.1, p. 329.

God the magnificent, the glorious and incomprehensible gave to man a great instrument (*magnum instrumentum*), sending His Son into the chaste purity of virginity.¹³⁹

Hildegard is to understand the growth of her mission within her and her ability to fulfil it as a parallel to God's election of another humble virgin and her awakening to the life contained in her womb. Mary's virginity and humble state served to conceal the secret within her "when in great silence the son of God came into the dawn light, that is, into the humble girl."¹⁴⁰ Thus the voice gets the last word in the argument and with it reminds Hildegard of the parallel between her self-description and that of the virgin: "The Virgin herself lived in a poor and humble state, because divine majesty wished to find her so. Now write as follows about the true recognition of the Creator's beneficence!"¹⁴¹

Mary, too, hesitated in her humility to acknowledge herself as the vessel of God's "eternal plan." This exchange between another angelic voice and a new virgin turns around forcing her to recognize the very grounds for her reluctance as identical to those that distinguished Mary in God's eyes to perform a task that is the archetype of her own. The same fundamental identification underlies Hildegard's descriptions of herself and her task in others of her works, although this passage illustrates with unusual eloquence the way she preferred to express it: not as *dictum* but as *factum*, not as an argument but as an experience embedded in vision, in images that are the rhetoric of her audio-visual gnosis.¹⁴²

Hildegard's admirers and biographers were more direct in their statement of her reading archetype. The testimony of her correspondents shows, in the words of John Van Engen, that "An untaught or nearly illiterate woman, able to draw beneficial communications from the depths of the divine hiddenness, ... such a person was explainable only as a living intimate of the divine spouse, a dwelling place of the Spirit."¹⁴³ This idea was frequently extolled in language calqued or quoted from the Song of Songs, and not infrequently in direct comparison to Mary. But the most emphatic affirmation comes from one who knew her well and admired her above all, Guibert of Gembloux.

With his first letter to Hildegard, Guibert describes Hildegard's "extraordinary and unheard of gifts" from the Holy Spirit in terms that make Hildegard fulfil for her

139 "Nunc dic ut docta es. Volo ut dicas, quamvis cinis sis. Dic revelationem panis qui Filius Dei est. ... Ipse initium suscitationis sanctitatis in homine exsistens, antequam in illo exsuscitetur. Unde etiam magnificus et gloriosus ac incomprehensibilis Deus dedit magnum instrumentum, mittens eundem Filium suum in pudicitiam virginitatis" (*Scivias*, 3.1, p. 330).

140 "... quando Filius Dei in magno silentio venit in auroram, videlicet in humilem puellam" (*Scivias*, 3.1, p. 330).

141 "Ipsa enim Virgo erat in pauperculis rebus, quia divina maiestas eam ita invenire voluit. Nunc scribe de vera agnitione creatoris in bonitate ipsius sic" (*Scivias* 3.1, p. 330).

142 Further instances are found in *Liber vitae meritorum*, p. 291, and *Liber divinorum operum*, p. 462. Holsinger, *Music*, pp. 124–25, sees the Virgin's womb as the generative centre of Hildegard's entire creative oeuvre, likewise encompassing its communal performance, which "brings women together in the *clausurum ventris*—the 'cloister of the womb' of the Virgin, ... that physically constitutes their institution and contains their musical lives." See also Ferrante, "Hildegard," pp. 104, 117.

143 Van Engen, "Letters," p. 415.

contemporaries the role Rupert gives to Mary. Her experience as the bride makes her the fountain of all scripture. She is “like a pure vessel” into which the Spirit pours its gifts, thus, “Truly, ‘thy breasts are better than wine’ to us, your fragrance better than the ‘best ointment’ (Cant. 1:1–2).”¹⁴⁴ Guibert continues extolling Hildegard’s experience in words from the Song of Songs for two paragraphs. In the second, he addresses her as *mater sancta*, and she becomes, again like Rupert’s Mary, the origin of all church doctrine as the *fons hortorum*, from whose womb flow the “rivers of living water.” “Truly,” he concludes in words from the *Ave Maria*, “save for her through whose Son we attain our salvation, your grace is unique among women,” and like Mary, she exhibits the reversal of the failing of her sex in Eve: “For through the same sex by which death entered the world, life has been restored—through His mother. And the same hand that served us the deadly cup of perdition has now poured out for us the antidote of recovery through your salvific teaching.”¹⁴⁵ In a gesture not atypical of his later letters, Guibert offers devotion to Hildegard as it is offered to Mary:

Hail, therefore, lady full of grace, after Mary, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women [cf. Luke 1:28] and blessed the speech of your mouth, which conveys the secrets of invisible things to men, and couples the heavenly to the earthly, and joins the divine to the human. Believing this with our whole heart, we confess with our mouth that you are the fountain of gardens, the well of living water that flows from Libanus [cf. Cant. 4:15].¹⁴⁶

“The speech of [Hildegard’s] mouth” is one with the fruit of Mary’s womb, which it displaces in Mary’s prayer, and lest one not give this parallel its full force, Guibert elaborates that Hildegard, too, “joins the divine to the human.” Once again the *fons hortorum* completes the equation. Hildegard is quite simply Mary’s identity as *magistra magistrorum* and *secretarium omnium Scripturarum sanctarum* embodied here and now in the teaching of a living woman.

Whether Guibert’s rhetoric is inspired by Rupert’s text or another intermediary, it establishes that, by the 1170s, the idea that Mary’s fulfilment of the prophetic images of the Song of Songs is an act of reading, a kind of living exegesis that makes her the origin of all scripture, can serve as a way of understanding a woman’s reading without learning. Hildegard’s biographer, Theoderic, confirms this point in a way that makes the direct connection to Rupert as a model all but unmistakable.¹⁴⁷

The key passages to this identification occur exactly where one would expect them, at the beginning of the *vita*’s second book, where Theoderic is concerned to establish Hildegard’s visionary authority. Having first solicited awe and disbelief over her accomplishments (“Quis vero non miretur ...”) he offers the following explanation:

Que omnia quia ei clavis David aperuit, “qui aperit et nemo claudit, claudit et nemo aperit,” gratulari merito et cantare anime sue licuit, quod eam “rex in cellaria sua introduxerit,” ut “inebriaretur ab ubertate domus” sue et *potaretur torrente voluptatis sue* [cf. Psalm 35:9];

¹⁴⁴ *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:16–17.

¹⁴⁵ *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:17.

¹⁴⁶ *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:44.

¹⁴⁷ Argued in detail in Powell, “Authorial Identity,” pp. 278–91.

unde et ipsa, sicut scriptum est, a timore Domini concipiens pareret et spiritum salutis super terram faceret.¹⁴⁸

(Because all this had been opened to her by David's key, the key that "opens and no one closes, closes and no one opens" [Revelations 3:7], her soul could rightfully rejoice and sing that she "had been lead into the king's wine cellar" [Canticles 1:3], so that she might be "inebriated of the abundance of his house" and made drunk by the torrent of his desire [cf. Psalm 35:9], so that she, too, as it is written, conceiving from fear of the Lord might give birth and bring forth the spirit of salvation on earth.)

When Theoderic uses the bride's experience to explain Hildegard's prophetic gift, he, like Guibert, concentrates on the image of her "drinking" knowledge of scripture. Rupert used the image of Canticles 1:3, *introduxit me rex in cellaria sua*, to describe how Elisabeth, "in whose womb the Spirit had also been at work," is introduced after Mary into the mysteries of scripture.¹⁴⁹ In Theoderic's description of Hildegard, the same equation between knowledge of scripture and the conception and bearing of a child applies, but with reversed significance: Hildegard's manifest knowledge of scripture *shows that* she drank of the "torrent of God's desire/pleasure/seed," just as Mary did; for good measure, Theoderic also cites Canticles 1:3, in effect combining the moments in which, for Rupert, Mary and Elisabeth become *prophetissae*.

Theoderic's account presents a battery of such textual allusions to Rupert's prophetic awakening.¹⁵⁰ A connection between the two had been noted before, though not fully examined or appreciated; moreover, some have dismissed it as an invention of Theoderic's that is somehow at odds with Hildegard's own.¹⁵¹ Our interest lies no less in Theoderic's contribution than Hildegard's, but there is no need to postulate any crucial difference between them. On the contrary: two scholars have shown that Hildegard's work betrays extensive knowledge of Rupert's, and the connection is nowhere clearer than in Hildegard's concept of and justification for her own position as *prophetissa*.¹⁵² Like Rupert, she places herself in this regard directly in Mary's footsteps. Theoderic's demonstration serves only to set the construction of Hildegard's prophetic authority explicitly into the mould from which it was first formed: that of Rupert's *adulescentula* from his commentary on the Song of Songs.

Rupert had revolutionized exegesis by interpolating his own "autobiography"—his visionary experience—as the fulfilment of the biblical text, in effect as its gloss. Theoderic's account is constructed explicitly to accomplish the same; he announces the interpolation of one of Hildegard's visions into the text as proof of "how fittingly" the

¹⁴⁸ *Vita Hildegardis* 2.1, pp. 118–20, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁹ *CCC*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁵⁰ Powell, "Authorial Identity," pp. 283–89.

¹⁵¹ Klaes, "Einleitung," *Vita sanctae Hildegardis*, pp. 61–63; Newman, "Hildegard," pp. 16–34, esp. 25–27.

¹⁵² Kerby-Fulton, "Prophet and Reformer," pp. 70–90; Meier, "Autorschaft," pp. 232–44, 261–62, 265; Meier, "Befreiung," 282, 288–89.

same biblical verse, Canticles 5:4, “can be applied to her.”¹⁵³ What is inserted begins as a vision but soon gives way instead to Hildegard’s account of her youth and education—that is, to autobiography. In this way, Theoderic would seem to collapse Rupert’s account from his Song commentary with the well-known “transfiguration” of the same in his Matthew commentary, completed only slightly later.¹⁵⁴ There Rupert inserted an autobiographical narrative in which the same visions reported for the *adulescentula* are claimed directly, rather than through the biblical *dramatis persona*, as his own.¹⁵⁵ Theoderic frames the insertion of Hildegard’s autobiographical “vision” with the two halves of the biblical passage (Canticles 5:4 and 5:5) that defines the visionary awakening in Rupert’s original version, the Song commentary.¹⁵⁶ That is, in Hildegard’s case, the identity of Rupert’s *adulescentula* is simply her own, or she is *quadam adulescentula* whose experience serves to gloss the biblical text in our time. She embodies an identification that, for Rupert as the receiving male, was accomplished through gender reversal. The “awakening” of the bride and opening to her beloved (Canticles 5:5–6) is Hildegard’s awakening to her vocation to preach and write, just as it had been for Rupert and Mary before her.¹⁵⁷

This gesture provides the logical and suitable completion of an identity Hildegard had discovered and assimilated to her own voice decades earlier.¹⁵⁸ Theoderic’s treatment only foregrounds the way this identity is embedded in the history of exegesis and the images of the Song of Songs; moreover, he again inflects the account such that Hildegard appears not merely as *indocta* but rather as the *illitterata* limited to her vernacular.¹⁵⁹ His exposition of her prophetic authority operates to force recognition of her visionary gifts as a re-embodiment of Mary’s reading *nostra aetate* in a psalter-literate woman.

The Marian devotion, or Marian epistemology, of Rupert and Hildegard was focused on the Incarnation as a gnostic event, the moment when human flesh apprehended and revealed the Word, when divinity became knowable and accessible as matter, as body. Rupert’s *De incarnatione Domini* revealed this experience as one that was knowable and readable in the Song of Songs as the images of the bride’s experience. Mary’s reading revealed divinity in the body, redeemed the body as it redeemed the sex of Eve, even as it revealed divinity in this most carnal and sensual, this most “female” of biblical texts. *Imitatio Mariae* was, for Rupert as for Hildegard, identification with the *sponsa et mater*, a way of reading and of re-experiencing the gnostic event in which *sponsa* becomes *mater*.

153 *Vita Hildegardis* 2.2, pp. 120–22: “Congruum autem videtur, ut hoc in loco scripta visionum eius aliqua inseramus, et ex his, quam convenienter sententia illa de Canticis: ‘Dilectus meus misit manum suam per foramen, et venter meus intremuit ad tactum eius’ sibi adaptari queat, videamus.”

154 The term is Rupert’s own in *De gloria*, p. 395.

155 Powell, “Authorial Identity,” pp. 281–87.

156 *Vita Hildegardis* 2.2, pp. 120–22; 130.

157 *Vita Hildegardis*, 2.3, p. 130.

158 As argued in Powell, “Authorial Identity,” *passim*.

159 *Vita Hildegardis* 2.1, p. 120; see the remarks in Klaes, “Einleitung,” p. 60.

This same idea reveals where Rupert's text and the Marian reading of the Song of Songs contained possibilities to transform *lectio* that distinguish them from other contemporary and later understandings of this central monastic reading experience. As Ann Astell lays out, to cast the act of reading in feminized terms became the hallmark of twelfth-century commentary on the Song of Songs. Whether Marian or not, whether Benedictine, Cistercian, or Victorine, "The exegetes all encourage their auditors to identify their 'bridal self' with the Bride, using the feminine figura as a way of evoking, expressing, and directing the emotional domain within themselves."¹⁶⁰ But Rupert's *adulescentula* is not an alter ego of the reading self through which first to identify with and then to transcend the carnal images of human experience. She is the reading soul's initiation into Mary's experience of the Word, an experience itself so intimate—that is, *so physical*—that it can never be surpassed. Its very carnality is its authenticity and its objective.¹⁶¹

Rupert, then, put a woman on both sides of the epistemological mirror. The act of reading the Song is one that seeks fusion with this female experience of the Word, the body as woman reads the life of the woman as bride; "she" is the reader and what is read, her experience is letter and gloss, starting point and objective. Only in this fusion, which he expressed as startlingly physical and sensual, could he claim the privilege of an alternative gnosis that bypassed the learned tradition of *sacra pagina* and that Mary's experience claimed as female (*hoc ego experta sum*). Rupert thus fully anticipated "the descent of the divine into the weaker sex," and revealed, in effect, the exegetical master key to a new domain of women's religious experience.

As I indicated in the last chapter, the packaging of Hildegard's identity documents with surprising fullness the ideas that accrued to the image of the woman-as-reader in the twelfth century. Mary's reading has its place at the centre of this complex image, as one of the varying facets of one and the same mirror. But one more aspect of the fate of Hildegard's gnosis remains to be emphasized before this picture is complete. It is now apparent that Hildegard, in adopting her identity as a poor, unlearned female form, was donning a mask devised by Rupert. For her, however, the same must have seemed to reveal her true identity as *prophetissa*. That is, just as she never claimed to be illiterate, but only to have acquired full knowledge of scripture without learning, so she did not foreground her sex as such, but only as a manifestation of identity with Mary's gnosis. She was, first and foremost, *homo* and, as such, knew God as *feminea forma*. But for her contemporaries, admirers and "publicists," another equation was only too clear, the one inherent in the model she adopted.

Rupert's reading begins and ends in the female, and for others, Hildegard manifested this reading in her being, that is, she reads as Mary did, *because* she is a woman, and woman's reading proceeds without learning, *because* she is flesh; it is authenticated, as

¹⁶⁰ Astell, *Song of Songs*, p. 10.

¹⁶¹ Astell makes clear in her discussion of other exegetes that the "feminine figura" is transcended in the rhetorical structure of the reading process. See, for example, the analysis of Bernard of Clairvaux in Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp. 73–77 and 89–104, esp. p. 94.

we saw in the last chapter, by the incapacity, or “illiteracy” that is deemed a consequence of woman’s nature. This is where Theoderic’s, and Guibert’s representations of Hildegard diverge from her own, but in so doing they only restore the underlying assumptions of the model on which she relied. Theoderic’s exposition of Hildegard’s prophetic authority is argumentative where her own was experiential; it substitutes the rhetoric of biblical exegesis for her complex use of imagery. Thus its rhetorical thrust lies in *demonstrating* that Hildegard is the embodied bride; the *sponsa et mater* lives and speaks among us, and as such she can only be a woman. Guibert’s praise of Hildegard as “the modern-day Mary” reveals the same shift: Hildegard’s gift is a special privilege granted her sex. This emerges in the passages quoted above when he sees Hildegard, like Mary, as the representative of “the same sex by which death entered the world,” the sex of Eve, and, equally, in the way her sex invites him to refer the significance of the images from the Song to the female body. The breasts that “are sweeter than wine” become, in his treatment, her own, and the image expresses her importance to “us” as that of a mother to her offspring. In effect, a male church (clerical authority) is nursed from the breasts of a lowly woman’s special intimacy with God.¹⁶² Like Mary, she was God’s “chosen vessel, dear to God, pleasing to angels, indispensable to men,” and, as Guibert adds, no less beloved by the clergy, “For they understand that the female sex has been divinely honoured through the sacred merits of your excellence, and they see your glory, the glory of a woman given new life by the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹⁶³

Guibert thus recognized in Hildegard the “special privilege among the women of our time” that was chronicled for the year 1159 by the author of the *Annals of Pöhlde*, one granted the weaker sex as the embodiment of human incapacity before God.¹⁶⁴ This same, however, clarifies how Hildegard stood before the church: not as *homo* before God but as a woman before the clergy, one who “teaches many through her sound doctrine, pouring forth abundantly from her two breasts,” but who also “bears in mind her sex, her appropriate condition, and especially the Apostle’s ... prohibition” against women teaching in church (cf. 1 Timothy 2:12).¹⁶⁵

Rupert’s text thus potentially articulated a woman’s *lectio*, and when completed by a woman, this *lectio* was no self-renunciation, not a reversal of a male identity, but an identification with herself as woman, as the weakness, humility, and ignorance—an emptiness longing to be filled—that Mary’s reading represents. Rupert’s circumvention of learned tradition, applied to Hildegard’s case, is understood as factual incapacity, and the reading identity of the *adulescentula* becomes biography as the *laica et illiterata*. Women, Hildegard and Elisabeth and many others after them, now read through their own physiological being and sexually defined selves, as vessels capable of conceiving and

¹⁶² *Epistolae* xvi, *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:16–17.

¹⁶³ *Epistolae* xxii, *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:43–45.

¹⁶⁴ *Epistolae*, xviii, *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:27. The same was a favourite argument of Abelard’s in his letters to Heloise see pp. 146, 189–90, below, and Powell, “Listening to Heloise,” pp. 270–72.

¹⁶⁵ *Epistolae*, xviii, *Letters of Hildegard*, 2:31.

bearing the Word. Similarly, women's physiological being is a living symbol of a bodily gnosis. The profound implications of this moment for the development of women's spirituality, mysticism, and late-medieval devotion have been amply demonstrated in the work of Caroline Bynum. But the superstructure that accumulates over such historical moments generally obscures from view the way they were perceived in their own time. In the twelfth-century context, what we have observed is a redefinition of the reading subject that gives reading form to a latent possibility of Christian gnosis. Its impact in its own time is to be sought, accordingly, in a new poetics of reading and gnosis that takes the woman as its focal, receptive point, and from there explores the relationship of alternative media—images, narrative, performance, and the vernacular as varying facets of body and presence—to the enlarged, or recast, epistemological landscape.

Chapter 3

CONSTRUCTING THE WOMAN'S MIRROR

The *Speculum virginum*

“Audi et vide”: Hildegard’s tirelessly reiterated description of her visionary illumination emerged in the last two chapters as, on the one hand, the announcement of a reading that proceeds without training in letters and writing and, on the other, as the moment in which the unlearned woman re-embodies Mary’s experience as *sponsa* of the Word. To experience the meaning of scripture unlocked, unmediated and at once, was to relive Mary’s original reading of the Song of Songs as Rupert of Deutz had read the same in her wake. But Hildegard’s emphasis on the audio-visual nature of the message sooner recalls the other epithalamic song of monastic spirituality, Psalm 44. “Audi filia et vide” (Psalm 44:11), begins the psalmist’s instruction and praise of the bride as she is led to meet the king at the heavenly wedding. Within the same two decades that separate Hildegard’s prophetic awakening from Rupert’s *De incarnatione Domini*, sometime between 1125 and 1141, that is, the same passage was chosen to shape a programmatic introduction to women’s instruction in scripture in the *Speculum virginum*.¹ The work’s original introduction, now found at the beginning of the third of twelve parts, assimilates the psalmist’s song to the bride to its own call to instruction:

*Audi filia et vide et inclina aurem tuam et obliviscere populum tuum et domum patris tui. Et concupiscet rex decorem tuum. Audi sanctae ecclesiae filia, uni viro Christo Iesu virgo casta desponsata et consignata, audi sponsum tuum ad aeterna dona te vocantem, vide premia premonstrantem, sequere precedentem.*²

(Hear, daughter, and see, and bend your ear, and forget your own people and the house of your father. So shall the king desire your beauty [Psalm 44:11-12]. Hear, daughter of holy church, chaste virgin betrothed and promised in everlasting fidelity to Jesus Christ [cf. 2 Corinthians 11:2], hear your bridegroom calling you to eternal gifts, see the rewards he shows you beforehand, so that you follow him who leads.)

The earliest and best manuscripts of the *Speculum virginum* come from important monastic centres along the middle Rhine within Hildegard’s and Rupert’s greater vicinity.³ By the late twelfth century, if not before, the oldest, known as manuscript *L* (ca. 1140), belonged to one “Hugo magister” of the Cistercian abbey at Eberbach—a mere day’s walk up the Rhine from Eibingen, where Hildegard re-established her own community after leaving the Rupertsberg.⁴ Another, manuscript *K*, was written ca.

1 Powell, “Audio-Visual Poetics,” pp. 111–35.

2 *Speculum virginum*, p. 58; cited hereafter as *SV*. Translations are my own, assisted by the German in the *Fontes christiani* edition and the selections found in Mews, *Listen Daughter*, pp. 269–96.

3 For a detailed account of the institutional history of women’s communities in the region, see Felten, “Frauenklöster,” pp. 189–300.

4 London, British Library MS Arundel 44; see Palmer, *Zisterzienser*, pp. 72–80 and 144–47.

1150 at the Benedictine abbey Maria Laach for use in the Augustinian congregation of Springiersbach, near Koblenz.⁵ Whether Hildegard herself perused this work is far from certain; it appears very likely, however, that she was intimately familiar with its contents.⁶ The entire project is conceived as if her extraordinary case were recast as a general method.

This “Mirror of Virgins,” the first treatise since the patristic period to offer a comprehensive introduction to the female monastic life, does so on the assumption that women do not, and at least in the learned sense cannot, read. Its twelve parts with their accompanying pictures are presented as if the transcript of oral instruction between the *magister*, Peregrinus, and his female pupil, Theodora. The extant manuscripts—which are plentiful even from the first century of its existence⁷—appear to have been used in men’s houses, leading to the conclusion that the text was a handbook and sourcebook for women’s male instructors and spiritual mentors.⁸ It thus offers an idealized portrayal of practice and a model for its own use. Within this ideal model the audience reads, as we shall see, in a way so fully compatible with Rupert’s and then Hildegard’s understanding of Mary’s reading that it is best seen as the translation of the same into different media for a new audience: the monastic art of *lectio* is recast as pictures and oral instruction for the female religious. The injunction to hear and to see acquires tangible objects in the oral address and the pictures, but even more so in a method conceived as if a dialogic meditation on scripture presented through oral performance.⁹

Most likely composed and progressively adapted over a period reaching from ca. 1125 to ca. 1145, the *Speculum virginum* emerges in the middle of the most dramatic expansion and reform of the monastic life in the history of the Western church.¹⁰ The Cistercian, the Premonstratensian, the Carthusian, and the Gilbertine orders all originated between the end of the eleventh and the middle of the twelfth centuries. The Cistercian order alone, founded in 1098, had expanded by 1153 to well over 300 houses.¹¹ The total number of monastic houses in some regions probably increased by a factor of ten.¹² Women

5 Cologne, Historisches Archiv W 276a, which also served as exemplar for the third extant twelfth-century copy, Rome, Vatican Library, Cod. Pal. lat. 565 (MS V); see Cohen-Mushlin, *Medieval Scriptorium*, pp. 116–19; and Seyfarth, introduction to *SV*, pp. 45*–46*, 61*–62*. The Springiersbach reform was heavily engaged in the foundation and care of women’s houses, as discussed in Felten, “Frauenklöster,” pp. 257–63.

6 Also suggested in Fassler, “Composer,” pp. 157–59.

7 Ten manuscripts before the mid thirteenth century, an eleventh contains an excerpt.

8 Bernards, *Speculum virginum*, p. 12; Powell, “Audio-Visual Poetics,” p. 113; Powell, “Instruction for Religious Women,” pp. 107–18.

9 Powell, “Audio-Visual Poetics.”

10 Seyfarth’s dating (introduction to *SV*, pp. 32*–37*) “bald nach 1140,” reflects little more than the date assigned MS L. Cf. Jónsson, *Miroir*, pp. 171–74, esp. 172; and Powell, “Picture Program,” p. 128n18.

11 Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism*, p. 13.

12 Constable, *Reformation*, p. 47. For estimates of the numbers of men and women concerned, as well as the size of communities, see Constable, *Reformation*, pp. 88–92.

loomed very large in this expansion, both in numbers and in substance, as it was only in this period that a monastic life under the Benedictine rule—one parallel in practice and equivalent in profession to that of monks—was broadly established and given clear institutional form.¹³ Two of the new reformed orders, the Premonstratensian and the Gilbertine, were founded expressly as double orders, with men and women living under the same rule and jurisdiction. Their foundation was preceded by a concerted movement within the Hirsau Benedictine reform in southern Germany to integrate women into the order in double monasteries; the Augustinian canons likewise founded numerous double houses or entered into looser associations with women's communities for which they provided pastoral care.¹⁴ Elsewhere, entire female monastic congregations sprang directly from the activity of reform-minded thinkers: the charismatic preacher Robert of Arbrissel founded the abbey of Fontevraud to house his female following in 1101; by his death in 1116 it had fifteen daughter houses scattered across western France; by 1149 the number had grown to nearly fifty.¹⁵ When the all-but-outcast Peter Abelard assumed the burden of housing Heloise and her sisters in the 1130s—themselves previously disowned by the Benedictines at Argenteuil—at his oratory of the Paraclete, the modest foundation grew to comprise six daughter houses by 1163.¹⁶ Reliable figures recently compiled for England and France show a fourfold expansion in the number of women's communities between 1080 and 1170, from around 100 to over 400.¹⁷ Similar expansion has long been acknowledged in Germany.¹⁸

The dramatic increase in the numbers of women in the monastic life placed the church before the enormous challenge of providing for their pastoral care, for the performance of the mass, preaching and confession, and religious instruction. The urgent need for more priests, canons, and monks to assume these duties is palpable in many sources, as are the disputes that often arose over the legitimacy of the intervention, over the challenge it presented to monastic vows of seclusion and chastity, and, most often, over the assignment of responsibilities.¹⁹ Evidence of positive engagement is no

13 Bertelsmeier-Kierst, "Bräute Christi," pp. 1–7; the situation should not, however, be over-simplified, as emphasized in Felten, "Frauenklöster," pp. 189–95. A useful overview of female religious houses in the earlier period is Gerchow, "Klöster und Stifte," pp. 156–62; also Delarun, "Monachisme," pp. 1–20.

14 Visually demonstrated by the map in *Krone und Schleier*, p. 309. See also Hotchin, "Female Religious Life," pp. 59–83.

15 Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, p. 62; see also Felten, "Verbandsbildung," pp. 306–21.

16 McLaughlin, "Heloise the Abbess," pp. 8–9; and Felten, "Verbandsbildung," pp. 287–301, esp. 299.

17 Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, pp. 11–12.

18 For Benedictine and Augustinian foundations in the period 1050 to 1200 the current state of research is displayed on the map in *Krone und Schleier*, p. 309. Bernards, *Speculum virginum*, p. 1, estimated the number of women's monasteries in Germany at seventy in 900, 150 in 1100, and 500 by 1250; Bertelsmeier-Kierst, "Bräute Chisti," p. 7, counts 220 Cistercian houses for women in Germany by the mid thirteenth century, making them far more numerous than those for men.

19 These duties would be formally institutionalized as the *cura monialium* in the course of the thirteenth century, primarily among the Dominican and Franciscan orders. See Küsters, *Garten*, pp. 170–72; Schreiner, "Seelsorge," pp. 53–65; and Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, pp. 199–318.

less striking, however. Beyond its celebrated story of frustrated love—and head-on confrontation with sexual desire in the religious life—the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise has been incisively interpreted as putting forward a carefully wrought argument justifying men's tutelage of the female religious and serious engagement of their specific practical, liturgical, and spiritual needs.²⁰ That Abelard filled this role for the Paraclete is amply evident: before his death in 1142, he left the nuns with a body of writings that “define the authority and the justification for their religious life,” including the first medieval monastic rule for women since the sixth century and a considerable body of sermons and liturgical texts.²¹ We also know that Abelard's literary efforts in this direction were avidly received elsewhere. The Guta-Sintram Codex from the Augustinian house of Marbach in Alsace, so named for the canoness and the priest who wrote and illuminated it, uses one of Abelard's sermons for the Paraclete as a *pièce justificative* for the relationship between male and female religious that the codex itself serves and in some ways embodies.²² The codex contains texts for use in the canons' pastoral care of the women, while a necrology that was maintained for both communities by the women makes up the body of the book. A necrology serves monastic memory of and prayer for the dead; the same reciprocal benefit is what Abelard so avidly seeks for himself from the sisters of the Paraclete.

Such relationships are not atypical. The mutual benefit envisioned, the intensity with which it is pursued, and the willingness to experiment are features as deserving of appreciation in the pastoral writings of Abelard as they are essential to an appreciation of the *Speculum virginum* or the subject of the [next chapter](#), the St Albans Psalter. The same are reflected in other literary and artistic examples of a new engagement of women's needs that cluster around the middle of the twelfth century: Irimbert of Admont's commentaries on the Old Testament, which originated in sermons and lessons for his monastic sisters,²³ a commentary on the Song of Songs written by Wolbero of St Pantaleon for the Benedictine nuns of Nonnenwerth—the first ever specifically addressed to women,²⁴ another commentary on the Song of Songs, the first in any vernacular, written for a women's community most likely within the Hirsau reform;²⁵ Aelred of Rievaulx's Rule for Female Recluses, with its intensely “visual” meditations on the life and Passion of Christ,²⁶ and a group of illustrated monastic prayer books that circulated in Germany and include possibly the

20 Von Moos, “Palatini quaestio,” 124–58; also Powell, “Listening to Heloise,” pp. 255–86.

21 Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, pp. 107–47; and “Abelard's Rule,” 241–92; Abelard's rule, however, seems never to have been put into effect, either at the Paraclete or elsewhere; see Haarländer, “Chancengleichheit,” pp. 41–60, esp. 55, 60. For a complete list of Abelard's writings for the Paraclete and their modern editions, see Mews, *Peter Abelard*, pp. 36–41 and [Appendix 2](#).

22 Strasbourg, Bibliothèque du Grand Séminaire, MS 37, dated 1154–58; see Griffiths, “Abelard's *cura monialium*,” 57–88, esp. 79.

23 See Beach, “Claustration,” pp. 57–75.

24 Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, pp. 271–76.

25 Known as the *Sankt Trudperter Hohelied*; study and historical context in Küsters, *Garten*.

26 See below, pp. 144–46, 154–56.

earliest cycles of illustrations supporting such meditations.²⁷ These works represent the beginnings of a new literature dedicated to the articulation and development of women's spirituality, monastic and otherwise. A new literature, however, assumes instruction in how to read. Once again, this might or might not mean training in literacy; in any case, it means an introduction to the function and place of "what is written" in the monastic life. As a work that served equally well within different reformed orders and is found within little over a half a century of its completion in an area stretching from Bohemia to eastern France, the *Speculum virginum* claims a prominent place in the vanguard of new forms of interaction and collaboration between men and women in the religious life, and above all in women's introduction to the monastic culture of scripture, or *lectio*.

The relationship between the literacy skills of its female audience and the audio-visual method of instruction is articulated in the *Speculum virginum* in terms of a now familiar duality: privilege goes hand in hand with incapacity, and, as a rule, the latter serves apologetically to justify the former. As virgins the women are singled out for a "special" and elite experience of scripture; the nature of this experience is, however, determined by limitation: as women they are repeatedly identified as the weak sex (*sexus fragilior* or *infirmior*) and thus as bound to the senses and the body, which is seen as confining their understanding to the literal meaning of scripture.²⁸ The use of the pictures is justified in analogous terms, favouring the allusion to Gregory the Great's equation: what scripture offers to those who read, the picture offers to the illiterate.²⁹ This equation, while conventional, is applied with real intention, for it is indeed alternative access to the meaning of *scriptura*, and not simply written texts, that is truly at stake.

When Theodora asks at the end of part 5 for an explication of the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, Peregrinus replies:

Quod ergo de hoc capitulo queris, sicut a patribus accepimus, pauca ponenda sunt, premissa tamen figura, ut consodales tuæ, si forte quod legunt non intelligunt, vel proficiant ex forma subposita, quia ignorantibus litteras ipsa pictura scriptura est et exemplo excitatur ad profectum, cui littera non auget intellectum.

(SV, 5, p. 159)

(What you seek on this passage of scripture, as we have received it from the fathers, will shortly be our subject. This picture precedes, however, so that your sisters in communal life may progress through a substituted figure if perhaps they do not understand what they read, for this picture is scripture for those who are ignorant of letters, and they may be incited to improvement by example for whom the letter does not aid understanding.)

²⁷ Hamburger, "Illustrated Prayer Book," p. 151.

²⁸ See, for example, Theodora's naively "letter-bound" inquiries, SV, 4, p. 113; 6, p. 175; 9, p. 287; and Peregrinus's increasingly impatient responses to such inquiries towards the end of the work: SV, 12, p. 352; and 12, p. 357; also Powell, "Audio-Visual Poetics," p. 114; and Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 145–50. This representation of the inquiring pupil as a simpleton is exceptional within the genre tradition of the dialogue; it is also oddly mismatched with the knowledge and understanding of scripture Theodora displays elsewhere: Flanagan, "Medieval Dialogue," pp. 192–93.

²⁹ See, in addition to the passage cited here, SV, 1, p. 39, and 10, p. 310; also Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 119–21 and 145–48.

The picture is neither here nor anywhere else a substitute for the ensuing text—Peregrinus’s oral explication of the “chapter” in question. The activity of reading refers instead to the encounter with sacred scripture, though possibly in a context other than (or in addition to) that of the ensuing conversation, and clearly occurs with or without understanding. It does not necessarily even imply functional literacy, for the “readers” can still be referred to as *ignorantes litteras*, and the letter is no aid to their comprehension. The picture is instead a substitute for a process of meditation on the scriptural passage, and in this sense Gregory’s apology can serve as a literal and pointed description of its function. What the study of scripture offers to the literate, the picture offers those who do not read: a deeper understanding of God’s word. What the *Speculum* means by “reading” is thus, again, the process through which the Word was apprehended and assimilated to life. For its female audience, this process is clearly seen to revolve around the oral presentation of the magister, a performance of the voice of Christ. In the final part, part 12, the *audi-et-videre* opening is paraphrased within the dialogue when Peregrinus says, “Hear, then, the voice of Christ, in His voice, the law of Christ, so that in Christ and through Christ you overcome what you once were.” In this case Theodora can respond, “This voice let me hear through you, this law let me hear through you.”³⁰

The *Speculum virginum* constructs female monastic identity as a reading process, seeking to transform “an old woman into a new” by introducing its female audience into the specific relevance of scripture, in particular scriptural imagery, to their monastic lives. It thus presents us with the singular opportunity to observe the point at which reflection on a “female” way of knowing the Word meets the lives and needs of large numbers of monastic women—as church authority and an ancient ontology portrayed them. The casting of the audience as semi-literate auditors and viewers performs as a smokescreen for the major innovation that the work represents: it undertakes to transform the *lectio divina* into an audio-visual performance, an instructor’s manipulation of voice, physical presence, and visual perception that is to deliver the Logos as a present, sensory experience.³¹

The *lectio divina* was the monk’s experiential counterpart of the scholastic’s exegesis; twelfth-century writers, above all, elaborated it as a progression from *lectio* through *meditatio* to *oratio* and, ultimately, *contemplatio*.³² Rupert’s commentary on the Song of Songs is in effect a performance of the *lectio divina* that is offered as authoritative and exemplary and thus displaces or fuses with exegesis. The way the analogy between reading process and exegesis is understood and implemented in the *Speculum* will emerge below. It is in the pictures themselves, however, that the intricate connections to Rupert’s text are most evident, and these have been previously elucidated.³³

30 “Peregrinus: Attende igitur vocem Christi, in voce legem Christi, ut in Christo per Christum vincas hoc, quod fuisti. ... Theodora: Vocem istam de te audiam, legem de te legam” (SV, 12, p. 360).

31 Powell, “Audio-Visual Poetics,” pp. 115–16 and passim.

32 Edsall, “Reading,” pp. 1–18 and passim; Stock, “*Lectio divina*,” 172–77. For a complete overview, see Robertson, *Lectio divina*.

33 Powell, “Picture Program,” pp. 142–52; Greenhill, *Voraussetzungen*, pp. 88–97.

The *Speculum virginum* went through several stages of composition, of which the last two can still be clearly reconstructed: the *audi-et-videre* opening once served as the introduction to a complete version of eight parts, now parts 3–10. To this trunk, two parts each were added to the beginning and end, now parts 1, 2, 11, and 12.³⁴ The addition thus displaced the original introduction and necessitated its reformulation. The author used this opportunity in a way that displays at once the importance of Rupert's text to his project and considerable innovation and ingenuity in its recasting as pictures for the virgins' contemplation. In its crucial passage on the *hortus conclusus* of Canticles 4:12, Rupert's account provided the image complex that inspired the "mirror picture" of the "fruits of the flesh and the spirit" as trees of vices and virtues, which we will have reason to discuss further on. There, Mary is identified with a new Paradise as Eve is identified with the old one, and both exist as potential images of self-identification (mirroring) and orientation in the virgin's personal transformation from "an old woman to a new." This concept was then recast, or rather, complementary dimensions of its meaning were captured through changing visual perspectives, in the two pictures that were added with parts 1 and 2, the frontispiece and the picture of "mystical Paradise" near the end of part 1. The author's conception of his method as demonstrated in text and picture can thus be seen as ongoing and repeated attempts to capture what Rupert presents as Mary's experience of the images of the Song of Songs, in particular of Canticles 4:12–16, but also in relationship to other passages of both his and the scriptural text.³⁵ Rupert's imagined ideas of Mary's life as bride become pictures that serve almost as maps to guide the women in its recapitulation.

These conclusions are of relevance not merely as further evidence of the capital importance of Rupert's model of Mary's reading for the *Speculum virginum*, but also, and more important, because they reveal women's reading taking shape as a visual translation, a kind of crystallization on the page, of the *lectio divina*. In the first section of this chapter, I will revisit the two successive introductions to the work to show how they also articulate a method in which the female religious are to realize a personal meaning of scripture for themselves as brides in an audio-visual theatre, performing a *conceptio per aurem et oculum* that was to be felt and lived as particular to their bodily selves. Mary's reading provides the model for a woman's assimilation of Word to self that bypasses learned exegesis and is to be felt as much as understood, to be "heard and seen," rather than acquired by cognition. As in Hildegard's case, the metaphors of male reading experience are re-embodied in the woman as audience of the Word. This idea of embodied reading is then the subject of the second section, while a third and final section distills from the investigation the outlines of a female poetics of body and truth that will serve in the following chapters as our guide to the emerging poetics of vernacular literature. The adaptation of Rupert's imagined ideas of Mary's experience into visual constructs that themselves serve as models for the reimplementation of a reading path provides

³⁴ Powell, "Audio-Visual Poetics," pp. 117–19; Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 517–39.

³⁵ Powell, "Picture Program," pp. 151–52, 154–55.

surprisingly intricate evidence of the way reading as a process was being reconceived through “bodily” media, translated into forms that sought to transfer not knowledge but experience to new audiences.

The Woman in the Mirror: Listening as *Adulescentula*

Rupert’s Marian gnosis sees the exegete reliving an experience in which letter reveals gloss through a simultaneity of physical and spiritual experience that is expressed one time for all in the sensual imagery of the Song of Songs. Mary is the key to a knowledge of scripture as experience, and the key to Mary’s experience is found in the reading path she took, the path of the *sponsa*. Rupert’s text offers two female alter egos, or reading selves, through which he or his audience complete this experience: the one is Ooliba, a figure of Eve, or the woman seduced by the flesh. The other is the “young woman” who, taken from the dialogue of the biblical text itself, “follows” Mary in her conception and bearing of the Word. Through the *adulescentula* Rupert is able to cast his own experience of union with the *sponsus* as witness to a reliving of Mary’s experience. The same two feminine models of reading in the body serve the *Speculum*’s recasting of *lectio* for monastic women: the two introductions cast the virgins in the position of the *adulescentula*, a *Maria imperfecta* who seeks to imitate Mary’s original conception of the Word through the instructor’s audio-visual address; while the reading process through which this takes place mirrors Ooliba’s transformation from Eve to Mary, making “a new woman from the old” (SV, 3, p. 59).

At the geometric centre of the work’s frontispiece, the visual introduction added with part 1, Mary reads from a large open book (fig. 3.1).³⁶ This centre is determined by the four corners of a square, created by two pairs of speaking figures: above, two prophets, Isaiah and Zachary, below, Peregrinus and Theodora. Mary herself, however, stands as one figure in a progression from bottom to top that appears at first to be genealogical but is in fact a portrayal of the history of God’s word in its human apprehension.³⁷ Seen iconographically, it is the visual embodiment of the first prophetic announcement of the Incarnation, “And there shall come forth a rod [*virga*, also “branch”] out of the root of Jesse: and a flower shall rise up out of this root” (Isaiah 11:1–2).³⁸ The same recurs in a much more straightforward realization of the prophet’s words at the work’s conclusion (that is, preceding parts 11 and 12; see fig. 3.2). There too, however—as nowhere else in the iconographic figure known as the Tree of Jesse—, Mary reads.³⁹ In the frontispiece,

³⁶ The frontispiece is considered here as it occurs in manuscript *L*. The picture is missing in the one other mid-twelfth-century manuscript, *K*, but judging from its copy, MS *V* (see note 5, above), was nearly identical. Cf. Cohen-Mushlin, *Medieval Scriptorium*, fig. 245. On the proximity of *L* to the author, see Powell, “Instruction for Religious Women,” pp. 517–34, esp. 529–30; and Seyfarth, “*Speculum Virginum*,” pp. 45–48.

³⁷ Powell, “Picture Program,” pp. 141–42.

³⁸ Resolved from its extremely abbreviated form, the passage in Isaiah’s book reads, “Egreditur virga de radice Iesse et flos de radice eius ascendet et requiescet super eum spiritus domini.”

³⁹ This statement applies to the best of my knowledge through the end of the twelfth century; I have not pursued it in the later period.



Figure 3.1. Frontispiece of the *Speculum virginum*, ca. 1140, London, British Library MS Arundel 44, fol. 2v. © The British Library Board.

the words in her book are taken from those spoken by Lady Wisdom in Ecclesiastes 24:22: "I have stretched out my branches as the turpentine tree." Mary thus describes herself (more properly, *reads* of herself) in a metaphor that creates identity between the tree metaphor of Isaiah's prophecy, Lady Wisdom, and the bride of the Song of Songs; the identity of the metaphor is realized in her life as the one bride who conceived the Word.⁴⁰ Prophetic letter becomes experience as Mary's life fulfils the words of the Old Testament and the Word becomes flesh. Without this moment there is no Christian scripture, and, accordingly, from Mary's reading act the new book is generated, Christ and the scriptures of his church: from Christ's head emanate the septiform "gifts of the Spirit" (cf. Isaiah 11:3–4), that here collate key textual elements of the Christian faith as the petals of a floral growth.⁴¹ With one more unique addition to the *stirps iesse*, which follows from Zachary's (initially mysterious) contribution to the conversation and no less from its latter-day double between Peregrinus and Theodora below, the author's conception of the virgins' reiteration of Mary's reading is complete: in four roundels below Mary are six virgins gazing upwards at her generative reading act and its result (fig. 3.3). In *odorem unguentorum tuorum curremus* (Canticles 1:3), they proclaim, in the inscription distributed over the four roundels: "We will run after the fragrance of your ointments."

This scriptural passage has programmatic value in the *Speculum virginum*. Combined with the preceding words of the same verse, *Trahe me post te*, it signals a moment in which the listening virgins' reception of scripture achieves identity with Mary's own, a kind of ascent to the letter of the word in which letter becomes gloss, or the recipient's story is identical with *historia*. To fully appreciate its place and function in the *Speculum*'s model of reading, we need to turn to the work's original introduction at the opening of part 3. But within the first exchanges of the dialogue in part 1 this significance is no less underlined. The full verse occurs there spoken by the one bride, Mary, and such that her moment of conception is identified as its meaning fulfilled. Mary is

the unplowed field ... that, made fertile by this seed without the aid of a gardener, brought forth a flower and the flower's fragrance for the eyes of man [*visibus humanis*], exclaiming with the bride to the bridegroom, *Trahe me post te, curremus in odore unguentorum tuorum* [Cant. 1:3]. Does she not speak of the fragrance of that flower?⁴²

⁴⁰ Ecclesiastes 24:22 was possibly favoured over a passage from Canticles for its first-person speech as a tree. The imagery of Ecclesiastes 24 is replete with echoes of Canticles and the two were intermingled in the liturgy. The verses preceding, in which Wisdom speaks of yielding a "sweet odor like the best myrrh," and "my odor is as the purest balm" (Ecclesiastes 24:20–21), taken together with the following verse, "I have brought forth pleasant odor: and my flowers are the fruit of honour and riches" (Ecclesiastes 24:23), are richly reminiscent of Canticles 1:11 as the moment when the bridegroom embraces the bride, lured by her odor of spikenard (cf. CCC, 1, pp. 29–30). Seen this way, Ecclesiastes 24:22 reads as another announcement of the conception.

⁴¹ One part of each of the following appears in each leaf: the Beatitudes, the *Pater noster*, the *voces Domini* (Psalm 28), the *coronæ triumphales* (Apocalypse 2 and 3), Articles of the Creed, the scriptures, and the Virtues (as listed by Watson, "*Speculum virginum*," 459–61; transcription of the text also in Seyfarth, introduction to *SV*, pp. 134*–36*).

⁴² The entire passage reads: "Campus heremi terra inculca est vel integritatis in Maria virginalis, de quo germinare sine culture fecunda florem et floris odorem visibus humanis produxit, proclamans sponso cum sponsa: "Trahe me post te, curremus in odore unguentorum tuorum" (*SV*, 1, pp. 7–8).



Figure 3.3. Frontispiece of the *Speculum virginum* (detail), ca. 1140, London, British Library MS Arundel 44, fol. 2v. © The British Library Board.

“That flower” is, here as elsewhere, the *flos filius eius* seen in the picture, identified in the opening lines that furl out below it as the *flos campi et lilium convallium* of Canticles 1:2. The picture describes the virgins’ reception of scripture as a sensory call from the bridegroom and the bride’s response. These virgins interpolated into the history of the Word as flesh are there to relive Mary’s reading act, to experience scripture as an *imitatio verbi conceptionis* completed through the eye and the ear. As the passage just cited elaborates, Mary takes her identity as the unploughed field,

in which “dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally” [Colossians 2:9], ... from that same flower, brought forth from the rod that sprang from the root of Jesse. This is then the flower that “young women [*adulescentulae*] so dearly love” [Canticles 1:2], embrace and follow devotedly while the mother and the son go before, so that they in turn may blossom among flowers and in this flowering chastity win the fruit of eternal life.⁴³

43 “‘in quo habitat omnis plenitudo divinitatis corporaliter,’ ... de hoc flore suo trahit, quem virga de stirpe Iesse producta produxit. Hunc igitur florem adulescentulae nimis diligunt, amplexantur, colendo sequuntur habentes matrem et filium praecedentes, ut cum floribus floreat et fructum aeternitatis in castimonia floribunda conquirant” (SV, 1, p. 8).

The *adulescentulae* from the Song of Songs are thus offered as figures of reading identification for the female audience, who in assuming this identity enter into the moment in which *sponsa* becomes *mater*.⁴⁴ The frontispiece is a visual reiteration of Rupert's reading model as a method of instruction in scripture for the female religious.⁴⁵

Little has yet been said of the conversation on the lower register of the picture's frame. This configuration, simple as it is, is the sole element of the earlier introduction to have been integrated as such into the new one. Two similar figures in conversation, with the man holding a scroll and the woman a book, are found at the beginning of book 3 in four other manuscripts; in the filiation of MS *L*, they were apparently displaced to appear rather unremarkably at the bottom of the preceding page, marking instead the end of part 2.⁴⁶ However, this is enough to indicate that what occurs between the two interlocutors in the frontispiece is the visual reiteration of a different, textual presentation of the same concept in the original introduction. Where the frontispiece keys the visual template of the *flos de virga iesse* to a dialogue from the Song of Songs, the original opening takes its visual template from the Annunciation and its textual inspiration from Psalm 44. Accordingly, it is more focused on the mode of communication, the articulation of a *conceptio per aurem et oculum*.

The original opening, cited at the beginning of this chapter, projects the argument for audio-visual presentation into an extended elaboration of the eleventh verse of Psalm 44. The psalmist's words *Audi filia et vide* signal at once the twin media of the method—although these receive no explicit mention—and the identity of their addressee. As the incipit indicates, this is “the address of the Holy Spirit to the daughter”; she is church, bride, and female religious. The verbs *audire* and *videre* are repeated eight times as a pair in this opening address (the first thirty-one lines of the modern edition), with four additional instances of *audire* alone. For us they might recall the (later) opening of Hildegard's *Scivias*, in which the “Voice of the Living Light” calls her to her own vocation. As a call to its monastic audience, however, the words unmistakably echoed the prologue to the monastic arch-text, the Rule of St Benedict: “Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui.”⁴⁷ The author thus anchored the opening

⁴⁴ In MS *V* (n. 5, above), the words *adulescentule dilexerunt te nimis* are included in the inscription in the roundels, which suggests they also occurred there in its exemplar, MS *K* (see note 36, above).

⁴⁵ While the phrase following from Canticles 1:3 (*Trahe me, curremus*, etc.), figures repeatedly in the text, the phrase *adulescentulae diligunt te* occurs only this once. Close examination suggests that it serves, upon the addition of parts 1, 2, 11 and 12, to underline the relationship between the *Speculum*'s reading model and Rupert's understanding of the Song of Songs. The *Speculum*'s elaboration of the *stirps iesse* in text and picture reveals a reshaping of at least three different passages from Rupert's commentary (cf. CCC, 4, pp. 87–88, and CCC, 1, pp. 13 and 33), in which visual ideas that arise in his text are reified and visualized on the page in the *Speculum virginum*.

⁴⁶ In one of these four, Zwettl, *Bibliothek des Zisterzienserstifts*, Cod. Zwettl. 180, the male figure, labelled as Peregrinus, also holds a book. The other three of this type are the Clairvaux group, discussed below. The manuscript from Himmerod (Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, W. 72), was copied from *L* and reproduces its solution. In the remaining manuscripts these pictures are either missing or were never executed. See also note 52, below.

⁴⁷ Benedict of Nursia, *Règle de S. Benoît*, p. 412; for the translation, see below, p. 102.

of his introduction to the female monastic life firmly within Benedictine tradition—with equally pointed variation from that tradition. While the Rule relies on the injunction from Psalm 44 to inaugurate the monastic life, it also clearly suppresses the visual component of the scriptural text. Moreover, for Benedict, the voice of scripture is distinct from that of the orally expounding *magister*, who is accordingly identified: “Listen, carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”⁴⁸ The master’s teaching echoes but does not appropriate the voice of scripture; accordingly, the son listens but is not asked to “see” the meaning he is to receive, and even the act of hearing is rather a metaphor for the reception of the truth, which properly occurs in the heart. For Theodora, the voice of the Spirit and that of her instructor are one: “Audi filia et vide, et inclina aurem tuam. ... Audi sanctae ecclesiae filia ... audi sponsum tuum ad aeterna donum vocantem, vide premia premonstrantem, sequere precedentem. Audi, inquam, legibus divinis intentendo, vide legibus ... ferventer obtemperando, audi quid sponsus precipiat, vide quid promittat” (Hear, daughter, and see, and bend your ear [Psalm 44:11]. ... Hear, daughter of holy church ... hear your bridegroom calling you to eternal gifts, see the rewards he shows you beforehand, so that you follow him who leads. Hear, I say, by attending to the divine laws, see by fervently obeying those laws. ... Hear what the bridegroom requires, and see what he promises) (SV, 3, p. 58). There is thus also no distinction (in the introduction) between letter and gloss, scripture and its exegesis. The biblical text is not explicated but rather appropriated to the instructor’s purpose: “Hear, I say ...” For the *Speculum virginum* and for the model of instruction it portrays, the woman re-embodies the addressee of the biblical text. Like Rupert’s *adulescentula*, she is part of the cast of its drama; her hearing and seeing are an immediate reception of its truth.⁴⁹

But it is another text, contemporary with Rupert’s, that more immediately illuminates the author’s project in this case: Bernard of Clairvaux’s four homilies on the Annunciation to Mary, *In laudibus Virginis Matris* (also known as “Super missus est”), dated to 1125. Like Rupert’s *De incarnatione Domini*, Bernard’s text is a meditation on Mary’s experience of the Incarnation, in his case focused entirely on the Annunciation as the moment and mystery of Mary’s conception. This moment he characterizes not as reading but rather as the perfect act of hearing and seeing, “to which she had long before been called by her father David” in Psalm 44.⁵⁰ “The king desired her beauty” (Psalm 44:12), because of the perfection he saw in Mary’s virginity and her humility, which are the expression of her full understanding—*avant la lettre*. For as Bernard elaborates at length, Mary could not yet have “heard or read” of the New Testament’s ideal of virginity (LVM, 3.7, pp. 40–41). Mary, then, “heard and saw not such as those who ‘hearing do not hear, and seeing do not understand’ (cf. Matthew 13:13); rather she heard and she believed, she saw and she understood” (LVM, 3.3, p. 37). The call to the bride from

⁴⁸ Benedict of Nursia, *Rule of St Benedict*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ The same point can be demonstrated by contrast with Jerome’s use of Psalm 44 in his letters to Eustochia and Principia. See Powell, “Audio-Visual Poetics,” pp. 119–20.

⁵⁰ *In laudibus Virginis Matris* 3.4, p. 37; hereafter LVM; references are parenthetical.

Psalm 44 is thus collated with a passage from the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18–23), whose subject is none other than the assimilation of the Word to the self as it applies to all Christians but is fulfilled in differing degrees. Bernard's audience is exhorted earlier as "all mothers" and "daughters, who, after Eve, are born and bear in pain," to "run ... to the bridal chamber ... where, behold, the angel is addressing Mary." There they may seek to overhear what Mary heard, to hear as she did: "press your ear to the wall and listen to what he proclaims, see whether you can hear whence you may be consoled."⁵¹

The original opening of the *Speculum virginum* collates the same scriptural passages to exhort its audience to emulate the same perfect act of hearing and seeing—not, however, by overhearing but rather by direct address. Following the fivefold exhortation to hear and to see at the outset, the *magister* continues with a paraphrase of Matthew 13:13, reformulated as an affirmative directive, "Querit enim Christus aures audiendi, querit oculos videndi," then adding an explanation that defines this hearing and seeing for the purposes of his method: "id est ut resideat interius, quod sonus innuit exterius, et fructificet ad mentis intuitum, quod trahitur per oculorum aspectum" (Christ seeks ears that hear, he seeks eyes that see, that is, so that what the voice intimates externally may dwell internally, and what is drawn in through the eyes' gaze may bear fruit in inner contemplation) (*SV*, 3, p. 58). These few lines contain the *Speculum's* audio-visual poetics of the virgins' assimilation of the Word to the self, its *conceptio per aurem et oculum*, an idea which becomes fully clear to us only once we recognize the model for the communication as Bernard constructed it on the same scriptural authority: the Annunciation as Mary's perfect act of hearing and seeing. The virgins as audience embody Mary's experience of the Word even as they embody the bride of Psalm 44. The means to their accomplishment is to "hear and see" as she did, that is (in our terms), to read the prophets' words as she did. Appropriately, then, Mary's *historia* per se, and in particular the text of Luke's account of the Annunciation, play no role in the exposition; the act of communication is nonetheless entirely modelled on hers with Gabriel, as on its objective.

The manuscript tradition offers visual evidence of this latter idea. In the three manuscripts that were copied at Clairvaux at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the picture that originally accompanied the *audi-et-videre* introduction is still found in the original position above that text (fig. 3.4).⁵² It doubtless shows us the predecessors of the two figures facing each other on the lower frame of the frontispiece in manuscript *L*. A male figure holding a scroll on the left addresses a woman on the right. These are

⁵¹ "Currite matres, currite filiae, currite omnes, quae post Evam, et ex Eva, et parturimini cum tristitia, et parturit. Adite virginales thalamum, ingredimini, si potestis, pudicum sororis vestrae cubiculum. Ecce enim Deus mittit ad Virginem, ecce affatur Angelus Mariam. Apponite aurem parieti, auscultate quid nuntiet ei, si forte audiat unde consolemini" (*LVM*, 2.2, p. 22).

⁵² Troyes, Bibliothèque municipale, MSS 252 and 413; and Berlin, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, MS Phil. 1701. The Berlin MS shows the figures seated, but the configuration is otherwise identical. A fourth copy not related to the Clairvaux group, Zwettl, Bibliothek des Zisterzienserstifts, Cod. Zwettl. 180, also shows standing figures and bears some resemblance to an Annunciation scene; for further discussion and reproductions, see Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 194–207.

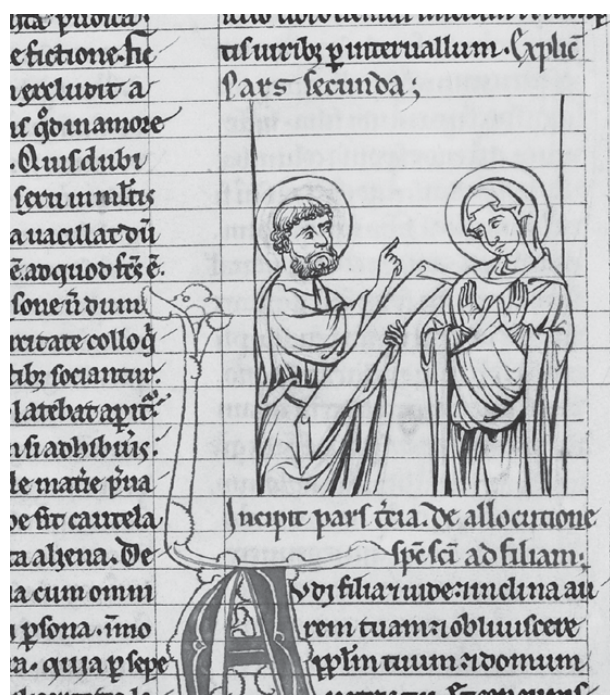


Figure 3.4. Peregrinus and Theodora, *Speculum virginum*, beginning of the thirteenth century, Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques Chirac MS 252, fol. 20r. Photo © Médiathèque Jacques Chirac, Troyes Champagne Métropole.

not properly understood if taken simply as Peregrinus and Theodora.⁵³ The best copy of the Clairvaux group, which also remained there, would suggest they should be identified as the Holy Spirit and the daughter of the biblical text: the incipit, *de allocutione spiritus sancte ad filiam*, appearing directly below it, reads as if a caption to the picture (fig. 3.4). In all three copies, the image contains hints of sacred or even divine communication: the figures are both nimbed as if saints or figures from scripture, the woman is in *orans*, and the man's raised hand and scroll are possibly reminiscent of the portrayal of prophetic speech.⁵⁴ The answer to the identity question lies in the relationship just observed between this text and Bernard's: the template for the image is in fact Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary.⁵⁵ What it presents is, nonetheless, not this communication but in

⁵³ The Zwettl MS is in fact the only one in which the figures are labelled as Peregrinus and Theodora.

⁵⁴ Camille, "Visual Signs," 111; and Camille, "Seeing and Reading," 28. As Camille notes, the scrolls can likewise be taken as indicating oral performance; see also Huot, *Song to Book*, pp. 78–79.

⁵⁵ On similar Annunciation scenes, see Wenzel, "Verkündigung," pp. 23–52, esp. fig. 5 (from Nicholas of Verdun's altar at Kloster Neuenburg); and Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, pp. 274–82. The *filia* in Troyes MS 252 (fig. 10) bears a striking resemblance to a portrayal of Mary in the same manuscript on fol. 58v, its picture of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.

a sense its typological predecessor. Some of the earliest examples of the Annunciation in visual art in fact occur as “illustrations”—typological materializations on the page—of either the third or eleventh verses of Psalm 44.⁵⁶ Thus the image in the *Speculum* presents a precursor of the communication between Gabriel and Mary that it is not yet resolved into its realized form as Christian history: just as its listening woman is a *Maria imperfecta*, it is an annunciation about to happen. And just as the final frontispiece does, this image places its interlocutors on a threshold between the prophetic image and its incarnate form, a threshold that is crossed as scripture speaks and the daughter responds.

The later frontispiece does not, in fact, simply reproduce this conversation on the lower register of its frame but instead splits the communication into three different exchanges: one that occurs between prophets above, another between figures of the present day, and the third, the object of the whole, between *sponsa* and *sponsus*—in turn doubly represented—inside the frame where the generative act is revealed. The “Tree of Jesse” inside the frame of the frontispiece is to an extent a visual condensation of the content of the conversation that follows (that is, the text), but this idea falls far short of its primary subject, which is the process of instruction as initiated on the same page between Peregrinus and Theodora, its origin, authority, and objective.⁵⁷ It shows how the virgins read within the frame of a once and present communication. The two introductions to the work articulate for the first time the position of the woman as audience of an audio-visual delivery of the Word.

Dialogue, then, is far from being a genre convention in this work. The call from the bridegroom and the soul's response are at the heart of its conception, this exchange forms the very moment of apprehension on which its audio-visual model of reading is based. Dialogue between the Word and the bride is the communicative fact that links the Song of Songs, Psalm 44 and Luke's account of the Annunciation. This same fact forms the very motor of both Rupert's and Bernard's texts, though for its concentration on, and suspense over, the single moment of Mary's response, Bernard's text is unmatched. At one point, he, the admiring observer, pauses to sum up what she has heard, urging her to consider and respond, to “open your heart to faith, your lips to confession, your womb to the creator,” and conceive.⁵⁸ The passage, which begins, “Audisti inquam ...” and then continues in incantatory repetition of the verb, may have inspired our author's use of the same in the present imperative (“Audi inquam ...”); in any case, Bernard's text again shows us what he is about. The entire introduction is an incantatory exhortation intended to lead to one moment: the virgins' response. This response, however, is not given to Theodora, who (as she often does) comments on Peregrinus's words as if an observer; it is instead supplied as part of the address, just as it also occurs within the picture (and not on the frame) in the frontispiece: “Proclamat enim: ‘Anima mea liquefacta est, ut dilectus locutus est. Trahe me post te!’ (Canticles 5:6, 1:3)” (She

⁵⁶ This tradition enjoyed a revival in Norman Sicilian churches of the mid twelfth century; see Kitzinger, “Descent,” pp. 99–115, esp. 106–7, 112–13.

⁵⁷ Powell, “Picture Program,” pp. 140–42.

⁵⁸ *LVM*, 4.4, pp. 53–54 at 54.

thus exclaims: “My soul melted as the beloved spoke. Draw me after you!”) (SV, 3 pp. 58–59).⁵⁹ This programmatic response in the words of Canticles 1:3, which occurs in the text a total of five times, will occupy us once more in the analysis of the reading method. Its use in the introduction corresponds perfectly to what we have thus far observed as the parallel between this annunciation and Gabriel’s to Mary: rather than speaking as Mary does, *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, the virgins are to attain identification with Mary’s experience of the prophetic image. Their own response is thus spoken in those images, the words of the bride through whose experience the images first become life.

What is most noteworthy in this conception is, however, not the idea in itself of a *conceptio per aurem* as completed through the oral delivery of scripture to the believing soul but rather the way the female audience is seen to re-embody an experience that is understood, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#), as Mary’s experience of the Word as life; the way “she” embodies Rupert’s reading path. An ancient metaphor for life lived in the Christian faith, that of Christ’s rebirth in the hearts of the faithful, is claimed as specific to their persons and their experience—as their *historia*, even as it is Mary’s.⁶⁰ The real affinity between the *Speculum*’s understanding of the *conceptio* and Bernard’s is found here: both participate in an exploration and intensification of the metaphor such that its meaning is experienced in a way that, despite an obvious paradox, is somehow insistently visceral, proper to the body and a literal understanding of scriptural imagery. This same is responsible for the surprising equivalence, visually unmistakable, between Isaiah’s first prophecy of the coming of Christ and the apparently unrelated response from Zachary on the right: “Quid pulchrum Domini nisi vinum germinans virgines (cf. Zachary 9:17)” (What is the beauty of God if not wine bringing forth virgins?).⁶¹ The connection between the two requires some explanation.

Zachary’s words have no known connection to the Tree of Jesse or to the Incarnation, but image and text together leave no doubt as to their place there in this case. The wine is the liquid that pours out from the two vases held in Christ’s hands and descends in carefully drawn tendrils to touch all the virgins in the picture (fig. 3.3).⁶² It thus causes the women to be reborn (“germinate”) within the tree as virgins “who follow the lamb wherever it goes” (Revelations 14:4; SV, 1, p. 18). But Zachary’s words in the frontispiece would also have been felt as the echo of another of Isaiah’s prophecies of the

59 I have corrected the punctuation as it stands in the edition, which misunderstands the prosopopeia in these lines. The words are all to be assigned to the bride (as tradition and the biblical text require). The exclamation *Trahe me post te* stands here as elsewhere in the text for the virgins’ inner assent; without these words she would offer no real response.

60 Rahner, “Gottesgeburt,” pp. 13–87.

61 The words *et frumentum electorum* (the corn of the elect), properly part of the scriptural text, were added later in extremely abbreviated form outside and to the right of Zachary’s “speech tablet and are not included when the passage is cited in the text.

62 These include John the Baptist and John the Evangelist to either side of Mary (as clarified in the text of part 5), but Mary herself does not appear to require the wine; its blue color instead already surrounds her nimbus as it does Christ’s. Peregrinus clarifies that the wine is Christ himself; Theodora then equates it with his blood shed on the cross: SV, 1, p. 11.

coming of Christ: *rorate caeli desuper et nubes pluant iustum, aperiatur terra et germinet savatorem* (Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above: and let the clouds rain the just. Let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour) (Isaiah 45:8). The understanding of Mary as the “unploughed” earth that brings forth the “flower” we encountered earlier in the exposition of part 1 of the *Speculum*, and Isaiah’s words on the rain “germinating” the Saviour were habitually associated with his other prophecies on the coming of Christ (for example, the *stirps iesse*) in exegesis and the liturgy—Isaiah 45:8 had been recited daily in the Office of Advent at least since Carolingian times.⁶³ Another Old Testament image, that of rain falling on Gideon’s fleece in Psalm 76:1, was well known as a typological precursor of Mary’s conception, which, like, the verses of Psalm 44, also found early illustration as the Annunciation.⁶⁴ Thus the idea of germination or impregnation through a liquid that falls from God—the equation of wine and water only serves further Christological association—is used here to grant the virgins a typological authority for their place in the tree that is equivalent in meaning (not in magnitude) to Mary’s own: Zachary’s words stand opposite Isaiah’s as the prophetic image whose visual realization identifies the virgins’ reception of the Word with Mary’s conception of Christ.

An image complex of rain, fertility, and plant growth that reveals the mystery of Christ’s descent to man in human form is thus variously and interchangeably evoked in the frontispiece as the gathering point, the quintessential locus for meditation on that mystery and its meaning for the female religious, an *imitatio verbi conceptionis*. That the experience and its meaning are intended as applying to the virgins specifically and exceptionally is the second point that Zachary’s words are made to demonstrate. As just indicated, the idea that Christ was received in the heart through baptism, dwelt there, and was born anew through every life lived in Christian virtue was a tenet of ancient sacramental theology.⁶⁵ The same idea could be extended to the reception of God’s word through his prophets and preachers, so that the Virgin’s conception of the Word was metaphorically repeated not only in the moment of initiation into the Christian faith but also whenever the Word was received in the community of the Spirit: the listening congregation was continually witness to the event of Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary as the embrace of Christ’s teaching in the individual soul.⁶⁶ The imagery of rainfall and fertility was similarly applied to this idea, such that the prophets become clouds and Isaiah’s words on the coming of Christ a rain that is to fertilize the understanding of the faithful even as Gabriel realized their meaning with his own words to Mary.⁶⁷

In the light of such generalization of the metaphors, it is no wonder that Theodora interrupts her *magister* to wonder for her own part, “why you ascribe the fruit [the

63 Deshman, *Benedictional*, pp. 11–13.

64 Kitzinger, “Descent,” 106–10.

65 Rahner, “Gottesgeburt,” pp. 13–17.

66 Deshman, *Benedictional*, pp. 13–14.

67 Deshman, *Benedictional*, p. 14.

bearing of Christ] solely to the virgins to the exclusion of the other orders.”⁶⁸ She insists at some length that the *fructus spiritus* is not their privilege *specialiter* but rather one available *generaliter* to the entire church, citing scripture effectively to her purpose. All of this merely sets up Peregrinus’s response, which builds on two scriptural passages. Matthew 19:11—“All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given”—he says, defines an elite reception of the Word among virgins (SV, 1, pp. 9–10). Zachary’s words then make their entry into the conversation to vindicate this understanding: “Note well what the prophet said, ‘What is the beauty of God if not wine bringing forth virgins?’” (SV, 1, p. 10). What the frontispiece portrays as the virgins’ *imitatio verbi conceptionis* is thus theirs and theirs alone.

This idea is elaborated in the work as a whole as the virgins’ experience of scripture *specialiter*. The same had already been more amply developed in the original introduction (part 3), where the author repeatedly distinguishes the virgins’ experience as closer to, if not identical to, Mary’s own, insisting on a reification of the metaphor as justified by their bodily identity with Mary’s virginal state. There, too, he begins with Matthew 19:11 and the idea that “[Virginity] is truly a special gift, not a general one, and is given only to the few.”⁶⁹ The idea of the virgins’ conception and bearing of Christ (with no picture to support it) is then more explicitly developed. The virgins are entitled to this gift as “special” compensation for their exclusion from carnal procreation, that is, in their sexual specificity as women. They conceive and bear a child inwardly in direct analogy to the reproductive roles of women in the world.⁷⁰ Peregrinus first underscores the women’s experience as a counterpart of Mary’s that is specific to their bodily virginity.⁷¹ He then uses the same reasoning to imply an experience of scripture for the virgins that is specific to their persons, in fact, to their bodies, because it originates from a bodily continuity with scriptural imagery:

Quamvis igitur *generali* comprehensione virginem dicat apostolus corpus universalis ecclesiae “desponi,” inquit, “vos uni viro virginem castam exhibere Christo,” *specialiter* tamen, quae vere virgines sunt, flores sunt ecclesiae mentis et corporis integritate, sicut idem ait apostolus: “Virgo domini cogitat, quae domini sunt, ut sit sancta corpore et spiritu.” (SV, 3, p. 65)

(Even though the apostle calls the body of the entire church a virgin in the general sense when he says, “I have promised you to one man alone so that I may lead a chaste virgin to

68 “Miror, cur solis virginibus fructum istum sic asscripseris, ut ordines licet magni meriti de hoc exclusisse videaris” (SV, 1, p. 9).

69 “Vere enim speciale donum est, non generale, paucis quidem datum” (SV, 3, p. 61).

70 “Maius est, inquam, spiritaliter Christus concipere et parere quam filios morituros carnaliter procreare. ... Carnalis igitur Christi virginum sterilitas sancta et voluntaria fecunditate compensatur spiritali et aeterna, in qua quia Christum bonis operibus virgo manens parturis, mater et fia sororque vocaris” (SV, 3, p. 64). See also Greenhill, *Voraussetzungen*, pp. 83–84; Bernards, *Speculum virginum*, pp. 189–92.

71 “Si igitur ordo fidelium in se Christo facit habitaculum, quanto magis cor virginum, cor pudicum et humile Christi est sacrarium? Christus semel a matre virgine natus est corporaliter, portatur, nascitur a virginibus sacris semper spiritaliter. O decus incomparabile virginitatis!” (SV, 3, p. 64).

Christ" [2 Corinthians 11:2], this applies in a special sense to those who are truly virgins, the flowers of the church by integrity of body and soul, just as when the same apostle says, "The virgin of the Lord attends to the things of God, so that she is sanctified in both body and spirit" [1 Corinthians 7:34].)

Thus, where the virgins' bearing of Christ is a spiritual reliving of Mary's corporeal experience, as women and virgins it is they who live out scripture *specialiter*, "in body and spirit," while the church in general does so only "in spirit."

This notion, however, begins to exhibit the Janus-faced duality of the woman's position: what is extolled as the exclusive privilege of an elite at the same time approaches a literal understanding of scriptural imagery otherwise associated with the incapacity of the body to proceed beyond a sensory level of understanding. The latter can thus serve equally well to justify the former, an observation born out in the *Speculum's* characterization of its audience as *puellae* before their mirrors (as we will see shortly) and consistent with the reading identity of the *adulescentula* as discussed in Rupert's use of the same.⁷² The two ideas became one in Mary's experience, a female understanding that is at once inveterately sensual and bypasses all cognition, and this is finally the significance of the virgins' "special" *imitatio* of Mary's perfect act of hearing and seeing. The same visceral *imitatio* was the consistent objective of Rupert's reading of the Song of Songs; Bernard likewise makes it the culmination of his meditation on the Annunciation.

For Bernard, Mary's conception of the Word figured as the extreme case of knowledge of God *specialiter*, that is, it proceeded not solely through love or the harmony of wills (*concordia voluntatis*) but also through the flesh (*carnem conjungere*, *LVM* 3.4, p. 38). The apostles were imbued with the Spirit, yet by no means such as Mary was, who conceived the Spirit in the body (*LVM* 3.2, pp. 36–37). The last word on the idea of such experience *specialiter* Bernard leaves to Mary herself in what are likewise the last words of *In laudibus Virginis Matris*, her so urgently awaited response:

Fiat mihi non tantum audibile auribus, sed et visibile oculis, palpabile manibus, gestabile humeris. Nec fiat mihi verbum scriptum et mutum, sed incarnatum et vivum, hoc est non mutis figuris, mortuis in pellibus exaratum, sed in forma humana meis castis visceribus vivaciter impressum, ... Nolo ut fiat mihi aut declamatorie praedicatum, aut figuraliter significatum, aut imaginatorie somnium; sed silenter inspiratum, personaliter incarnatum, corporaliter invisceratum. ... Fiat quidem generaliter omni mundo, sed specialiter fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum [Luke 1:38].

(*LVM* 4.11, p. 57)

(Let me experience this not only such that ears may hear, but also such that my eyes may see, my hands touch, and my arms bear. Let me know the Word not in mute, written form, but rather alive and embodied: that is, not through dumb signs drawn on dead parchment skins, but as human form impressed in my chaste, living flesh. ... I do not wish to experience this either through the preacher's rhetoric or through figural signs or fanciful dreams, but as if filled with a silent breath, given personal flesh, in the depths of bodily sensation. ... Let this happen generally, then, to the entire world, but to me especially, according to your word.)

⁷² See note 28, above.

Bernard's rhetorical invisceration of the Logos goes far beyond anything Peregrinus attempts. Nevertheless, both are engaged in the same "historicization"—a kind of narrative reinvention in the life of the body—of the birth of the Logos in and through the hearts of believing Christians.⁷³ The distinction between Mary's experience and that of the entire church, in which for her alone is "special" and literal what for others is "general" and allegorical, was part of the same tradition.⁷⁴ But the fervent plea of Bernard's Mary is in truth no less the author's own, in turn recommended to his audience (suitably, then, the text culminates in desire, rather than its fulfilment), and it leaves no shadow of a doubt. Her entire being is focused on a palpable, visceral experience of the Word, voiced in terms that reject, by contrast, an intellectual cult of the "dead letter." This experience *specialiter* is still uniquely hers, but by being hers it holds the promise of being available to others: "Let this happen generally, ... but to me especially." Bernard's Mary thus expresses her desire in terms that encourage identification with the sensory reality of a seemingly inimitable experience.

By adopting this model for its own audio-visual wedding between the Word and its female audience, the *Speculum virginum* completes a next, crucial shift in the understanding and application of reading through the body of the *sponsa et mater*. Its audience becomes a *sponsa corporaliter*, a remanifestation of the truth of the biblical text in our lives—just as the *adulescentula* figures in Rupert's text to vindicate his own attempt to "make the lamb with the Holy Trinity." With the *Speculum virginum* this idea is no longer one of a feminized or female reception of the Word but rather a model for women's reading, their general reception of the truth of scripture as specifically determined by their female nature. The tradition of a millennium of Christian thought, which had seen a life in Christian virtue as part of the larger body of Christ, his church, and thus as participating in the generation of that body, is reified and focalized in the experience of the woman-as-audience, who herself re-embodies the life of the Christian faithful, an *imitatio verbi conceptionis*.

The Woman in the Mirror: Reading as *nova ooliba*

Religious women ... understood that "man ... signifies the divinity of the Son of God and woman his humanity." And they understood that both equations were metaphorical. But given the ultimate dichotomy of God and creation, the first was *only metaphorical*. Man was not divinity. The second was in some sense, however, *literally true*.⁷⁵

Thus Caroline Bynum formulated the basic equation that stood behind the gender-specific trajectory of women's spirituality from the twelfth century onwards. This idea is possibly codified for the first time when the *Speculum* articulates it as the meaning of

⁷³ On the increasingly somatic understanding of the metaphor in the High and Late Middle Ages, see Dinzelbacher, "Gottesgeburt," pp. 94–128; on gender identification, see JP, pp. 421–22, and Fulton, "Quae est ista," 117.

⁷⁴ Rahner, "Gottesgeburt," pp. 14–17, 33, 59, 63, 65, 70.

⁷⁵ Bynum, "'And Woman,'" p. 178.

scripture in the virgins' lives *specialiter*. Their experience is continuous with the *sensus literalis* of the biblical text not only semantically but also ontologically; that is, not only do scriptural images of the bride's experience apply in a specific, personally experienced way to the lives of the female religious, but also their experience of scripture generally, as a result of their physicality, is seen as remaining bound to and never fully renouncing the literal meaning.⁷⁶

With its definition of the woman-as-audience, the *Speculum virginum* extends the understanding of woman as the flesh of the Incarnation into the realm of reading and poetics; this single gesture provides the seminal idea for the introduction of the project, whether in the original or the final version. We observed the same in Hildegard's announcement of her prophetic *persona*: she could see Rupert's understanding of Mary's reading as continuous with her own biography because woman's physicality provided the vessel that originally embodied the Word. As others saw and represented it, however, Hildegard was privileged to immediate and full knowledge of scripture *because* she was a woman, unlettered and body-bound. In this way her miraculous gnosis proclaimed the arrival of the symbolic position of woman as the key to a new understanding of the place of the body, the flesh, and material representation—*visibilia*, "visible forms," was the twelfth-century term—within the relationship between *homo* and Logos, human capacity to know the divine. The *Speculum virginum* fleshes out the position of woman in this relationship and in so doing reveals the relationship between a collection of topoi associated with women's religious lives and questions of epistemological aesthetics—the same that will be encountered in later chapters at the centre of a new vernacular poetics.

The position of woman as body is here at the basis of a continuing development of women's and men's spirituality that witnessed a divergence in the nature and understanding of their religious experience. As recalled in the last chapter, "The image of both a sinful and a saved humanity is the image of woman."⁷⁷ Just as humanity fell into a life of sin through the action of a woman, Eve, so its redemption from that life, the life of the flesh, occurred through Mary as the New Eve. The foregrounding of women as subjects fundamentally alters the structure of identification with this idea. Rupert, as a man, could assume a position of feminine identification as a self-conscious act of renunciation, one no less discontinuous with his biography than his monastic life was discontinuous with the life of a man in the world. The male writer sought this reversal "because reversal and renunciation were at the heart of a religion whose dominant symbol is the cross—life achieved through death."⁷⁸ With this idea of reversal and renunciation as "the heart of religious dedication, women, who were already inferior, did not have much to offer. Moreover, neither maleness nor femaleness could serve for them as an image of renunciation."⁷⁹ As a result, women, to define and fulfil their spiritual selves, embraced

⁷⁶ On representation of Theodora in this respect, see above, n.28.

⁷⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 265; see also pp. 267–68; also emphasized by Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁸ Bynum, "And Woman," p. 171.

⁷⁹ Bynum, "And Woman," pp. 178–79.

their humanity, their physicality and fleshliness, as the expression of their own proximity to God: "Women reached God not by reversing what they were but by sinking more fully into it."⁸⁰ Thus they reported their religious experience "in images that continued ordinary female roles (bride, child, mother) and stereotypical female behaviour (vulnerability, illness, bleeding)."⁸¹

With its *audi-et-uide* opening, the *Speculum virginum* projects this idea into the staging and conception of instructional communication itself, inviting the female audience to "sink into" the scriptural imagery of the bride's seduction and thus to receive the letter of the Word as continuous with her own experience. The further consequences of mediary translation—exegesis becomes oral address, *lectio* becomes bodily experience, its visualizing process becomes picture—can all be seen to proceed from this first shift: the rhetorically feminized audience, such as figures so prominently in male monastic reading of the Song of Songs, becomes a real audience of women, male renunciation becomes female self-contemplation.⁸² The idea is then enshrined, no less, in the work's titular mirror. It is likewise readable as a method that is repeatedly demonstrated in the text. Properly understood, then, this is the guiding idea behind the *Speculum's* translation of *lectio* into a method suitable for women: the woman's position replaces the idea of renunciation with that of self-contemplation, the identification between woman and flesh as mirror of her own life in its spiritual transformation.

In the discussion of Rupert's completion of this redemptive value inversion of the flesh, I argued that Mary's reading in the body also redeems the vehicles on which it depends: the historical/literal sense of scripture, narrative, and the image. Mary's reading functions as a basic theological switch capable of unleashing an enormous expansion in the implementation of bodily media as vehicles of an experience of the presence of the Word. The full magnitude of this shift and the way woman and women's roles were implicated within it can only be grasped against the background of the fusion of the feminine and the aesthetic, of the female body and the ornamental and rhetorical arts, which the twelfth century inherited from patristic thought. In *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, R. Howard Bloch marshals an impressive array of anti-feminist topoi from patristic tradition to demonstrate what he sees as the eternal conundrum of woman in the Christian world. Because his subject is so intricately tied to literary poetics—in particular vernacular literary poetics—the terms of his argument are doubly relevant to my own—with inverted significance. They constitute a powerful résumé of precisely those patterns of thought that were overcome in the twelfth century's reinvention of woman as reader and sign to be read.

⁸⁰ Bynum, "And Woman," p. 172.

⁸¹ Bynum, "And Woman," p. 172. See also Newman, "Golden Bowl," 26–27.

⁸² Another crucial shift, that from the abstracted world of Latin to the concrete and biographical world of the vernacular, may have occurred as well in varying degree. It is conceptually fully in keeping with the rest, but whether the instructor delivered from or paraphrased the text directly or orally translated as he went or a mix of these was used doubtless depended on the circumstances in each case. See Powell, "Audio-Visual Poetics," pp. 131–32; and Powell, "Instruction for Religious Women," pp. 45–48, 127–31, and 151–53.

Bloch's project is to map the origins of a "feminization of the esthetic" that, he argues, is so pervasively influential in Christian thought that it makes up the very origin of the association of "the question of woman" with "that of reading in the literary history of the West."⁸³ The identification of woman with flesh and with secondary representation originated in the story of creation itself. Not only because it was Eve who seduced Adam but also because "the creation of woman is synonymous with the creation of metaphor, the relation between Adam and Eve is the relation of the proper to the figural, which implies a derivation, deflection, denaturing, a tropological turning away."⁸⁴ Thus, the Fall was a fall into the order of Eve, "a fall into mediations, signs, representations that imply a gap between inner and outer, the [prelapsarian] body and its cover."⁸⁵ Such thinking was at the root of "a metaphysics that abhorred embodiment," in which "woman's supervenient nature" was "indistinguishable from the acute suspicion of embodied signs—of representations."⁸⁶

Women's proclivity for ornament and cosmetics figures as proof positive of their perversity in this argument, and on this point in particular, the point at which the flesh seduced glories in itself as seductress, one finds some of the most vehement displays of misogynist rhetoric. The following is taken from Tertullian's treatise "On the Apparel of Women":

Come, now; if from the beginning of the world the Milesians had been shearers of sheep, and the Chinese spinners of silk, the Tyrians dyers and the Phrygians embroiderers, and the Babylonians weavers of tapestry, if pearls had gleamed, and gemstones sparkled; if gold and the greed it inspires had already issued from the earth; if the mirror, too, had already been allowed to lie so largely; all these things, I imagine, Eve would have coveted, once she was banished from Paradise and thus already dead. Any woman, therefore, who hopes to live again [in Christ] should not long for them now, or even know of them, since she did not possess them or know of them when she lived in Paradise. All these things are but the baggage of woman in her condemned and dead state, arrayed as if to lend splendor to her funeral.⁸⁷

Woman-Eve (or *homo Eva*, for Tertullian admonishes his audience, "Do you not recognize Eve as yourself?") is the author of a multiplication of signs, of corporeal forms experienced as a movement away from God; to indulge herself in those same, to see them as enhancing her beauty and the means of enticing others' gazes—this was the height of depravity, devilry itself. It identified woman as a Christian Pandora, generator of the entire catalogue of vices known to man.⁸⁸ All these ideas, and even the specific ornaments and accessories of women's seductive art with which they were frequently illustrated, play an explicit role in the central demonstration of women's *lectio* in the *Speculum*

⁸³ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 47–48, s.a. pp. 90–91, 45.

⁸⁴ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 38, s.a. pp. 22–29.

⁸⁵ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, p. 99.

⁸⁶ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Translation of this passage has proven troublesome; this one is my adaptation based on several others in consultation of the Latin text as found in Tertullian, *Toilette des femmes*, pp. 43–45.

⁸⁸ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, p. 45.

virginum. There, however, they are the starting points of a transformation that repeats the original redemption of woman and flesh through Mary as *nova Eva*, the New Eve. But before I turn to the *Speculum's* solution to this metaphysical conundrum—and here one should not overlook the place given its titular mirror in Tertullian's tirade—one further point in the patristic tradition deserves special emphasis. The world of representations is verbal as well as visual, woman is synonymous with rhetoric, the seductive power of the spoken word, and ultimately with poetry and poetics as “representational pleasures” appealing to the senses and prone to the decorative and ornamental.⁸⁹ This dimension of the argument is witnessed in the long tradition of Christian rhetoric in rejection of *ioculatores*, or jongleurs, who were also the primary purveyors of vernacular poetry:

If any one delights in the sports of the circus, or the struggles of athletes, the versatility of actors, the figure of women, in splendid jewels, dress, silver and gold, and other things of the kind, the liberty of the soul is lost *through the windows of the eyes*, and the prophet's words are fulfilled: “Death is come up into our windows” (Jer. ix. 21). Again, our sense of hearing is flattered by the tones of various instruments and the modulations of the voice; and *whatever enters the ear* by the songs of poets and comedians, by the pleasantries and verses of pantomimic actors, weakens the fiber of the mind.⁹⁰

Jerome broadens Tertullian's focus from a perversion of the soul that operates through the eye to include the ear as well. All the senses are gendered feminine, but the eye and the ear together are the primary “windows” of a seduction exercised on a female body.

If preoccupation with the visual remains the most pervasive feature of the rhetoric that conflates woman, flesh, and ornament, it is because visual perception, above all, makes the woman into the image of the flesh as both the seductress and the seduced. The same idea implies, as a consequence, the doubling or mirroring of an essentially feminine gaze. When it delights in material form, the flesh gazes upon itself. As Bloch observed, “If woman is conceived to be analogous to the senses or perception, then any look upon a woman's beauty must be the look of a woman upon a woman, and the male gaze is a non-sequitur.”⁹¹ Rupert exploited this very idea to an opposite purpose through his feminine reading models. “You should emulate [Ooliba's] gaze and desire,” Mary tells her followers, but that desire should be directed towards “a better picture.” For Rupert and other twelfth-century thinkers, the problem lies not in the seductive nature of visible forms, in exterior things, but only in the *intentio* of the viewer, the inner orientation of “her” desire, or the direction of “her” gaze.

There is no doubt that Bloch is correct to insist on the persistent and comprehensive identification of woman with a dualistic abhorrence of the flesh—in all conceivable manifestations. The problem with his argument lies in a failure to recognize that it was medieval thinkers themselves, and not modern scholarship, who first dismantled it by reversing its assumptions. Where Bynum's work reveals that the same extension of dualistic oppositions on which such thinking was based could be employed to enable its

⁸⁹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, p. 46.

⁹⁰ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 2.8, p. 394; emphasis added.

⁹¹ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, p. 106.

reversal, Bloch sees no such possibility: "Poised between the contradictory abstractions implicated in each other, women are idealized, subtilized, frozen into a passivity that cannot be resolved. ... Woman, at least no real woman, can resolve the dilemma of the contradictory abstracted double."⁹² In women's reading as it is offered in the *Speculum virginum*, we will see how the twelfth century answered Bloch's supposed conundrum by calling upon "young women" to gaze upon Ooliba's gazing as the mirror of their own desires, a process that takes place almost entirely as juxtaposition of opposites and postulates that it is the very doubling of the flesh on both sides of the mirror that makes integration out of opposition, Mary out of Eve.

The most concise formulation of the effort to "redeem" woman and the vehicles of her perception in the *Speculum virginum* poses the paradoxical possibility of redemption through "fallen" media as a figure of the relationship between flesh and spirit. The passage in fact introduces the picture that begins part 8, the picture of the *colluctatio carnis et spiritus* (struggle of flesh and spirit) (fig. 3.5). Taking the bull by the horns, as it were, it begins with Eve and Adam:

Nonne et hoc habes in apostolo, quod: "Caro concupiscat adversus spiritum et spiritus adversus carnem?" Eva seducens virum Adam carnis concupiscentia est seducens spiritum, in qua colluctatione nisi ratio et sapientia moderetur utrumque, alterum periclitatur ab altero. Quod ut apertius clareat, rursus figuram ponamus, et quomodo sensus carnales obvient spiritalibus, quomodo trahant isti, illi fugiant, ostendamus. Sepe enim aliud per aliud consideratur, et per rerum imagines visibilibus obiectas intellectus acuitur. Sicut igitur proprium habet qualitas et natura uanitati studentium puellarum, vicio curiositatis pre ceteris laborare et in speculis leuitates nugarum suarum exercere, sic Christi uirgines, quacumque rerum similitudine uel collatione uisibilia possunt inuisibilibus conferri ipsæque per hoc ad profectum uirtutum excitari, gratanter intuentur, coniectantes maiora de minoribus et quandam ueritatis soliditatem in figuralibus speculantes rationibus.

(SV, 7, p. 220, punctuation slightly modified)

(Did not the apostle write: "The desires of the flesh are in conflict with the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are in conflict with the flesh?" [Galatians 5:17]. Eve seducing the man, Adam, is the desire of the flesh seducing the spirit. Unless the power of reason and wisdom governs each in this struggle, the one is imperilled by the other. So that this may appear more clearly, let us once again turn to a picture, and show in what way the corporeal senses impede the spiritual, in what way the latter draw forth, even as the former flee. Often, though, the one is contemplated through the other, and understanding is sharpened by images of things offered for visual inspection. Just as it is characteristic of the quality and nature of girls studious of vanity to cultivate curiosity above other vices and to tend to their frivolous trifles before a mirror, so also the virgins of Christ gladly contemplate whatever similitude or analogy through which visible things may be transformed into invisible ones such that they be excited to the perfection of virtues, understanding greater things through lesser ones and seeking [*speculantes*] the solidity of truth in figural representations.)

The passage makes a jump from the equation "woman is to man as flesh is to spirit," to the equation "the carnal senses are to the spiritual (senses/things) as picture is to

92 Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 90–91.

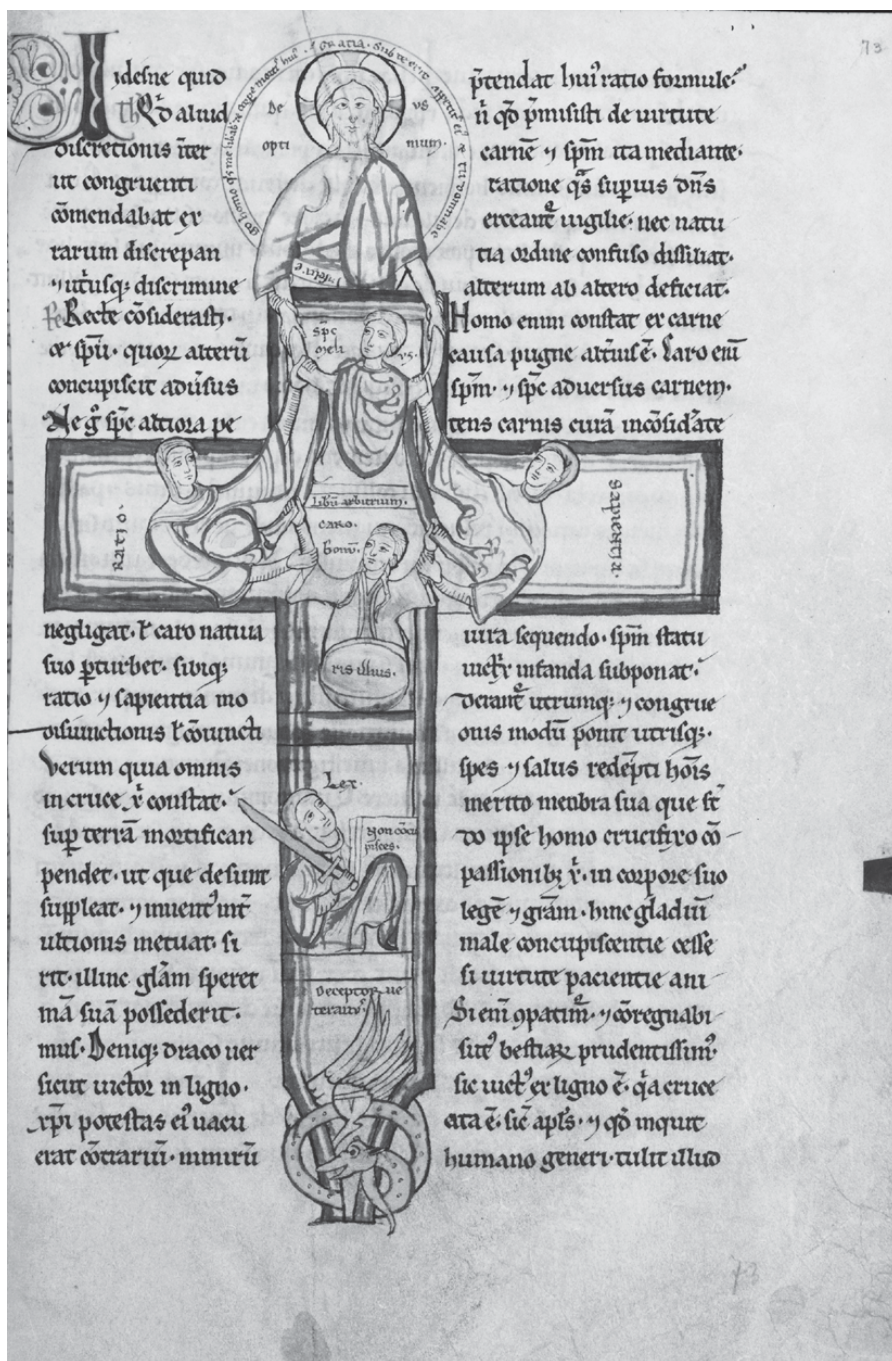


Figure 3.5. The Struggle between Spirit and Flesh, *Speculum virginum*, early thirteenth century, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, MS W. 72, fol. 73r. Creative Commons License.

idea." The process of the first equation is said to be seduction, while in the second it has become instruction—but is nonetheless reidentified as one in kind with young girls' preening before their mirrors. This last image is by no means a mere topos: the mirror as an image of human recognition is equated here for the first time with the mirror as an accessory of female beauty, and this with remarkable intentionality.⁹³ The movement back and forth between the opposition of spirit and flesh and that of picture and idea allows the two processes to become one in this image of woman before mirror, which is itself both object and mirror of the audience's own gaze. The emphatic opposition of the Pauline dictum that opens the passage is simply elided; the defence of the flesh is not overtly espoused, it rather emerges as a simple consequence of the extension by analogy of the binary opposition. At the end we are left with the idea of a continuity between the female gaze of *curiositas* and an equally female gaze that seeks spiritual enlightenment.⁹⁴

In the picture thereby announced, *caro* is represented as a woman and *spiritus* as a man (fig. 3.5).⁹⁵ *Caro* receives the attribute *bonum* and is thus hierarchically distinguished from *spiritus-melius* and *deus-optimus* but also placed in a continuous relationship to them: the separation is one of degree, not of kind. Beyond this, this picture offers little that would seem immediately to fulfil the promise of the passage with which it is introduced.

Demonstration of the women's reading as the way to the spirit through the flesh instead forms the central, structuring idea of the original presentation of the project; that is, in the text of part 3 and the double, mirror picture that follows, commonly referred to today as the "Trees of the Vices and Virtues" (fig. 3.6). Reversal of patristic rhetoric occurs there in a form analogous to that observed in the passage above, by seizing on the very terms of the rejection and performing their transformation. Eve becomes a wise virgin who gazes on a new mirror twice over, through two media jointly employed. The text of part 3 transforms the seductive finery—the "ornaments"—of the daughters of Sion (Isaiah 3:16–22) together with their mirror into the "mystical wedding finery of virgins."⁹⁶ The whole is to serve at once as a mirror of spiritual beauty and as the exemplary demonstration of how the women read. The picture, which the text designates as "the fruits of the flesh and the spirit" (*fructus carnis et spiritus*) (fig. 3.6),⁹⁷ is likewise identified as a mirror, the contemplation of which is conflated with the process of reading scripture:

⁹³ Jónsson, *Miroir*, pp. 196–97.

⁹⁴ On this point, too, Jónsson underlines the originality of the *Speculum*: "Cette juxtaposition des deux fonctions du miroir est tout à fait remarquable à l'époque; ... aucun auteur médiéval n'avait dans le même texte défini et séparé les deux fonctions avec tant de netteté" (Jónsson, *Miroir*, p. 189, s.a. 193–99).

⁹⁵ The sex of the *caro* figure is readily evident in both *L* and *K*, the two oldest and best copies, and it is especially clear in *H*, the direct descendant of *L*, as seen in Figure 3.5.

⁹⁶ "Mystica virginum ornamenta sponsalia" (*SV*, 3, p. 72).

⁹⁷ *SV*, 3, p. 83, and 4, p. 85. Elsewhere, the text does refer to the pictures as "trees," but never offers the title *arbores viciorum et virtutum*.



Figure 3.6. (continued)

Speculum, filia queris. Ecce quantum profeceris vel defeceris, in alterutro fructu speculari poteris. Hic enim, si te queris, reperis. Speculum dici non potest nisi quod intuentis imaginem representat. Igitur ex consideratione sacrae scripturae te ipsam consule, et aliqua vel virtutum vel viciorum vestigia reperis impressa conscientiae tuae.

(SV, 4, p. 85)⁹⁸

(You ask for a mirror, daughter. Here you can behold, in the one fruit and the other, how much you have progressed and where you are still wanting. Here, indeed, if you seek, you will find yourself. Nothing can be called a mirror unless it reveals the image of its beholder. Therefore, advise yourself through the consideration of holy scripture, and you will discover the signs of the vices and virtues impressed on your conscience.)

Only apparently the representation of two irreconcilable opposites, the picture in fact superimposes an idea of growth or progress in the moral, inner life onto a history of salvation as the transformation of the old Paradise into the new, a transformation whose human agents are Eve and Mary.⁹⁹

In the picture of the *fructus carnis et spiritus* as in the passage on the “struggle” between them, opposition is not a figure of antithesis but an invitation to join, compare, and retain what is useful in movement from the one to the other; to observe, as Peregrinus says, “how much you have progressed and where you are still wanting.” The trees are an image of their beholder in that her gaze invents a self-image in the space between them, supplying a mediating position in the void between evil and good, *superbia* and *humilitas* as the roots of the trees. The progression from the old to the new Paradise is made most immediately evident through their respective “fruits,” labelled as *vetus* and *novus Adam*. Around the left tree a serpent coils. This tree, *Babilonia sinistra*, as its inscription reads, represents the old woman, who brings forth the old man; while the right tree, or *Ierusalem dextra*, generates the new man, Christ as an outgrowth or “fruit” of her inner virtue. This tree stands in the same relationship to Mary’s generation of Christ as the communication illustrated above the *audi-et-videre* address does to the Annunciation. The virgins, contemplating their “beauty” in this mirror, fulfil the pedagogical value envisioned for flesh and picture (*fructus carnis*) in the passage from part 8; they fulfil no less the conception and bearing of Christ (*fructus spiritus*) as envisioned in the final frontispiece. In a remark occasioned by discussion of the other mirror at hand, the ornaments of the daughters, Peregrinus makes clear that the contemplation of either mirror is an exercise in reading scripture, which, in turn, is the process that allows the virgins to bear Christ within: “For Christ is the Word of the Father, and thus Christ is reborn within your breast even so much as you delight in the Word of Life. Where then should the vices take root, when within you grows the fountain of all virtue?”¹⁰⁰

The female viewer reconstitutes Mary’s transformation in her hermeneutic mediation between the left and the right tree. Mary is thus present in the image to the extent that it is properly “read,” even as Christ is conceived and born anew through the same

⁹⁸ The words in *alterutro fructu* refer to the two pictures. A passage later in part 4 describes the effects of scripture as a mirror in similar terms (SV, 4, p. 107).

⁹⁹ Powell, “Picture Program,” pp. 136–38.

¹⁰⁰ “Cum enim Ixistus verbum sit patris, totiens Christum geris in pectore quotiens delectaris verbo vitae. Ubi igitur locus erit vitiorum, quando apud te geris fontem virtutum?” (SV, 3, p. 68).

hermeneutic act. The picture visualizes as a process the invitation to the bride in the opening address to make “the new woman from the old, a beautiful woman of an ugly one, a strong woman of a weak one”; that is, to enter into the transformation from Eve to Mary, which is itself the redemption of woman. Here, then, lies the solution to the woman’s reading conundrum: woman as body contemplates obverse images of the body as woman and “seeks herself” as a moment of transformation from the one to the other; her reading life is a figure of the integration of the life of the flesh into the life of the spirit. No less was described above as the process whereby the virgins “gladly contemplate” their self-image as young girls who “tend to their frivolous trifles before a mirror,” seeking to transform *visibilia* into *invisibilia* even as they seek “the solidity of truth in figural representations”: these pictures of her reading path.

As indicated above, Rupert’s understanding of the Song of Songs stands behind this image and is present on the same terms as Mary is herself: the picture maps out the generation of the *paradisus novus* from the *paradisus antiquus*, which Rupert, in a passage he singled out as the inner mystery of his text, had read as Mary’s realization of Canticles 4:12, *hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus*.¹⁰¹ The picture offers the virgins a stage of reflection and visualization that corresponds to the topological dimension of this reading act: the way it is relived in the inner life. The text affirms this idea in the same way as it does elsewhere, through the words of Canticles 1:3 to signal the virgins’ identification with the images of Mary’s experience—a moment to which I will return below. It is the idea of the woman’s reading of the Song of Songs as a mirror in which she relives and transforms, as Mary did, the seduction of Eve, that unites scripture, picture, and Mary’s reading path equally as the “visual” objects of the virgins’ reading, as one and the same mirror in which she sees “herself”—as a woman before a mirror.¹⁰²

In the discussion of the daughters of Sion, woman’s reading life is presented, literally speaking, as the process in which she is clothed and adorned as the bride. Theodora requests treatment “of this mirror and ornament in both literal and figurative meanings” so that she might not arrive at the wedding “improperly dressed,” or, in the words given her by scripture, “that she not be found naked even while clothed” (2 Corinthians 5:3).¹⁰³ “This mirror” is thus also that used by young girls in the art of pleasing the beloved.¹⁰⁴ “Looking-glasses [*specula*] are so-called because women use them to look on their faces and their finery,” says Peregrinus as he catalogues this item with the rest of the ornaments.¹⁰⁵ As he turns from the literal to the figural, or “mystical”

101 CCC, 4, pp. 85–86. Rupert begins his fourth book with the words, “Ecce in medio nuptiarum sumus, nuptiarum hominis regis.” See also Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien*, p. 132.

102 Eleanor Greenhill’s attempt to interpret the text as a commentary on the Song of Songs was thus not so abstruse as it appeared to many, as affirmed (exceptionally) by Leclercq, *Review of Greenhill*, 477–79. See also Jónsson, *Miroir*, pp. 187–99.

103 “Quia igitur speculum visibus nostris proponere decrevisti, non pigeat te de hoc speculo et ornatu isto ad litteram et figuram aliqua resolvere, ut ipsa de his scientia sit ... Christi virginibus cautelae providentia, ne iuxta apostolum vestitae nudae inveniantur” (SV, 3, p. 68).

104 Also emphasized by Jónsson, *Miroir*, pp. 196–97.

105 “Specula dicta sunt a speculando, eo quod facies suas et copitis ornatum in eo soleant speculari...” (SV, 3, p. 71).

explication, he substantiates the analogy by appropriating a passage from Paul to his own purposes: “Nonne et habes in apostolo, quod ‘mulier innupta cogitat, quomodo placeat deo, quæ autem nupta est cogitat, quæ mundi sunt, quomodo placeat viro?’ Diversus amor utriusque discernit inter utrumque” (Does not the apostle say, where “the unmarried woman is intent on how to please God, she who is married is intent on things of this world, on how to please her husband” [1 Corinthians 7:34]? The different love of each distinguishes between them) (SV, 3, p. 71). The continuity that Peregrinus intends between worldly and religious women is the result of a liberty taken with the biblical text. In a contrast between virgins’ attention “to the things of God” (*quæ Domini sunt*) and that of married women to what pleases men (*quomodo placeat viro*),¹⁰⁶ Peregrinus replaces *quæ Domini sunt* with *quomodo placeat Deo*, forcing a parallel in the efforts made to please the beloved. The injunction to contemplate things divine he omits altogether: the flesh, the entire concern of the worldly woman, is implicitly upheld as the starting point for the spiritual quest of the virgin, while “a different love,” the differing direction of their attention, will distinguish between them.

This starting point of the virgins’ quest to become the consummate bride thus puts them in the same position as Rupert defined for his audience through Ooliba. The same attention is to be devoted to a different picture-beloved. This basic movement of affective identification that then undergoes a transfer of object governs the entire presentation of the ornaments of the daughters; rather, the presentation serves to initiate its audience into the same as their way of reading in the body. Accordingly, Peregrinus’s attention to the ornaments *ad litteram* does not treat of the “historical” sense of scripture—the cautionary tale of how the daughters of Sion fell out of favour with the Lord¹⁰⁷—it is rather no more than a glossary that allows the listener to situate the Latin names of the ornaments in the world of her own experience (SV, 3, pp. 70–71). The images themselves apply to the virgins in the special sense: “Crede verbis nostris, filia, sermo iste propheticus specialiter adversus eas dirigitur, quæ ... sanctimonialum nomen acceperunt” (Believe our words, daughter! The prophet’s words apply in a special way to those who ... have accepted the sacred name of nun) (SV, 3, p. 69). Having gathered these scriptural images, Peregrinus proceeds to their individual relevance for the virgins’ inner lives, their meaning *ad misticam* (SV, 3, pp. 71–77). They are mapped onto an ideal image of self, which becomes—very much in the sense just seen for the picture—the mirror of what the listener sees in the daughters as women in the world, daughters of Eve.

Peregrinus’s instruction thus performs as *lectio* and *meditatio* within the *lectio divina*. Passages of scripture are selected in their relevance to the reader and then assimilated to self through a meditative process. As recast for the female religious, however, this process corresponds to an interiorization of the images of Eve’s seductive

106 The Vulgate reads: *Et mulier innupta et virgo cogitat quæ Domini sunt, ut sint sancta corpore, et spiritu. Quæ autem nupta est, cogitat quæ sunt mundi, quomodo placeat viro* (1 Corinthians 7:34). This passage is cited all of nine times in the *Speculum*. The other eight instances limit themselves to the first sentence, pertaining to the virgin, and follow the Vulgate text.

107 This same is briefly considered earlier, SV, 3, pp. 66–67, such that the daughters are identified with *superbia* and the virgins with *humilitas*, but only as a preliminary.

art and their transformation into an image of inner, spiritual growth. Theodora refers to the same idea as the proper function of the ornaments of the daughters when she urges Peregrinus to continue “ut quod feminis ornatus iste conferre videtur exterius, mysticis significationibus pro nobis agat interius” (so that what this finery is seen to bestow on women outwardly may work through its mystical meaning for us inwardly) (SV, 3, p. 74). The image of the virgins’ inner life is in turn realized as fusion with the letter of scriptural imagery—but within “a different picture”: the process culminates repeatedly in a fusion between Word and self that corresponds to a fusion between letter and gloss as witnessed through the experience of the bride in the Song of Songs. The process of clothing and adorning the bride is in this way demonstrated as a reading process that uses woman’s proclivity for ornament and the exterior as the inverted means of her redemption.

Virgins and daughters are initially equated in their original vocation as “viewers,” or “watchful souls”: “Syon speculatio dicitur, cuius filiae sunt sanctae animae virgines precipue ad auctorem suum ardentissimo amore speculandum procreatae” (Sion means “lookout,” and the daughters are the holy souls, above all virgins, who were created to watch in ardent love for their creator) (SV, 3, p. 68). Later, the daughters’ moral failing is identified explicitly as one of visual cupidity; wandering eyes trigger depraved moral development:

Denique in nutibus oculorum filiarum Syon duplex cor et inconstans intellige, ubi quod mens maliciose vel vane concipit, indecenti gestu corporis prodit et, quod gerit intus, exterius ostendit.

(SV, 3, p. 69)

(Finally, you should see in the lustful glances of the daughters of Sion a duplicitous and inconstant heart, in which that which the mind conceives in malice and vanity is manifest in an indecent bearing of the body, and what is born within becomes manifest without.)

This passage finds its implicit reversal in Theodora’s statement of her objective as just cited, which itself echoes the *conceptio per aurem et oculum* as evoked in the *audi-et-videre* address: “so that what the voice intimates externally may dwell internally, and what is drawn in through the eyes’ gaze may bear fruit in inner contemplation” (SV, 3, p. 58). The gaze of the bride of Christ, no less than her hearing, draws from the exterior to the interior, where her moral life takes shape as the progressive perfecting of her own image as the *sponsa corporaliter*. The virgins seek to become the *sponsa et mater*, but like Rupert’s *adulescentula*, they inherit the capacity to do so from Eve, represented here by her descendants, the daughters of Sion. The assimilation of scriptural imagery to their reading selves occurs as the visual reclaiming of the images of woman as seductress so that these may instead seduce the heavenly bridegroom.

The seductive intention of the literal ornaments is emphasized especially for the first, the *calciamentes* (sandals), and the last, the *fascia* (corset). *Lascivia muliebris* is responsible for the ornaments on sandals, “so that they may please their lovers all the more.”¹⁰⁸ The *fascia* is a cloth wrap that pushes up the breasts, “to offer them more generously to

¹⁰⁸ “... ut magis ex hoc amatoribus suis placeat” (SV, 3, p. 70).

the eyes of the beholder.”¹⁰⁹ The same features recur in the mystical explication, where the idea of physical beauty, far from being suppressed, is expanded and supported in each case by a citation from the Song of Songs. Peregrinus begins, “What else is to be understood of [the virgins’] footwear, if not what you read in the Song of Songs: ‘How comely your steps in your sandals, o daughter of the prince!’ [Canticles 7:2].”¹¹⁰ All told, he will cite the Song of Songs eight times in the mystical explication of the ornaments.¹¹¹ The repeated effect is to refer the worldly beauty of the daughters not only to an abstract inner virtue but also to the equally physical beauty of the bride of the Song. The explication *ad mysticam* culminates in the *fascia* and the *olfactoriola*. Of the *fascia*, which is worn by the virgins as a sign of their chaste fidelity to Christ, the Song is made to bear double witness:

“Pone me,” inquit, “ut signaculum super cor tuum, ut signaculum super brachium tuum.” Sicut enim lascivia virgo seculae papillas carnis erumpentes stricta premit fascia, sic vera virgo, veri sponsi sponsa castitatis et pudicitiae vinculo vincta interiora ubera sua, ut spiritu sancto preventa possit proclamare: “Dilectus meus mihi inter ubera mea commorabitur.”

(SV, 3, p. 76)

(“Place me,” the bridegroom says, “as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm [Canticles 8:6].” For just as the lustful young woman in the world presses up the swelling flesh of her breasts with a tightly wrapped cloth, so the true virgin, bride of the true bridegroom, should bind her inner breasts with the bond of chastity and modesty, so that, once filled with the Holy Spirit, she may proclaim, “My beloved will rest between my breasts” [Canticles 1:13].)

The text makes its own explanation here of “how” the listener can be brought to “proclaim” identification with the letter of the bride’s experience, and the understanding operates by strict analogy (*sicut ... sic*) with the worldly woman’s concern for physical appeal to her lover. The virgin understands her experience through this analogy—the “special” relevance of scriptural images to her life as embodied bride—and proclaims it in the words of the bride of the Song. The transfer of the experience of worldly women to the spiritual life does not suppress or even mitigate its sensual appeal; the literal meaning is not relinquished but rather realized in the poetic eroticism of the Song of Songs.

This is the ascent to the letter of the bride’s experience that we saw illustrated in the frontispiece and announced in the original introduction. The reading moment—Mary’s own—occurs over and over again in the text; it serves several times to portray the fulfilment of the instructive process as either the realization of an inner Paradise or the consummate virgin’s entry into the heavenly Paradise.¹¹² The first of these occurs in the mystical treatment of the *olfactoriola* (perfume vials), which concludes the ornaments of the daughters of Sion. “The pure hearts of Christ’s virgins are the holy *olfactoriola*,” Peregrinus begins, and then unleashes a rhapsodic accumulation of aromatic spices

109 “... ut gratior intuentum oculis videatur” (SV, 3, p. 71).

110 “Quid de calciamentis aliud intelligendum est, nisi quod habes in canticis canticorum: ‘Quam pulcher sunt gressus tui in calciamentis tuis, filia principis?’” (SV, 3, p. 72).

111 One of these, SV, 3, p. 77, was overlooked in the edition.

112 In addition to the passage discussed below, see SV, 1, pp. 37–38; 4, p. 97; and 10, pp. 306–8.

and floral growths as the virgins' inner virtues.¹¹³ The passage serves to assimilate the *emissiones* of the *hortus conclusus* in Canticles 4:12–13 to the virgins' inner lives, thus completing as *reading practice* the identity between them and the same scriptural image that, while itself the *fons et origo* of the visualization of their lives in the *fructus spiritus*, remains otherwise unspoken in the text.¹¹⁴

In his olfactoriolis humilitatis redolet viola, hic aureae spirat verecundiae rosa, lilium albae castimoniae, poma spiritualis exuberantiae, ibi denique "ciprus cum nardo, nardus et crocus, fistula et cinamomum cum universis lignis Libani, mirra et aloe cum omnibus primis unguentis," hoc est in cordibus virginum perfecto amore Christum querentium inveniuntur suaveolentia germina omnigenarum virtutum, quarum radices mentis et corporis puritas et humilitas.

(SV, 3, pp. 76–77)

(In these perfume bottles the violet of humility releases its fragrance, the rose breathes golden modesty, the lily chastity, the apple spiritual exuberance; there, where "the cyprus with nard, nard and saffron, cane and cinnamon with all the trees of Lebanon, myrrh and aloe with all the best unguents" [Canticles 4:13]—that is, in the hearts of virgins who seek Christ in perfect love, there are found the sweetly fragrant shoots of every kind of virtue, whose roots are purity of mind and body and humility.)

The exposition of the daughters of Sion—as Peregrinus indeed indicates at the outset—is none other than the same transformation as reading process that is visualized in the two trees as the Old and the New Eve. The two presentations duplicate each other, but as consummate translations of one idea into two different media. The passage that follows concludes, then, in the only way possible, by describing the assimilation of letter to life as identification with the archetype of the *sponsa's* response: "His unguentis et aromatibus Christi virgines delibutae cum apostolo possunt proclamare, 'Christi bonus odor sumus' ... et illud: 'Trahe me post te, curremus in odore unguentorum tuorum'" (When they have been daubed with these unguents and perfumes, Christ's virgins may proclaim with the apostle, "We are the good fragrance of Christ" [2 Corinthians 2:15], ... and that word, "Draw me after you, we will run in the fragrance of your ointments" [Canticles 1:3]) (SV, 3, p. 77).

The same programmatic moment, here applied to the virgins' listening "conception" (scripture as *speculum*), is applied to its ocular complement once the picture-mirror of the same process has been introduced between parts 3 and 4. The demonstration of the pictures as *speculum* builds to an analogous rhetorical crescendo evoking the virgin's entry into heavenly Paradise.¹¹⁵ In this last instance, the picture itself opens like a

113 "Munda Christi virginum corda sancta sunt olfactoriola ..." (SV, 3, p. 76).

114 This identification was then indeed made explicit in the reconception of the opening in part 1 and its pictures; see Powell, "Picture Program," pp. 147–48.

115 The inspiration for the *Speculum's* use of Canticles 1:3 possibly came from the liturgy of the feast of Mary's Assumption, where it occurs as Mary's dying words, marking the culmination of a narrative in which she seeks reunification with Christ; see Fulton, "Quae est ista," 101–17, esp. 107, 113. The congregation would have known it as such.

window onto Paradise¹¹⁶—when the instructor asks his pupil to witness the “mutation” of the one tree into the other:

Sed leva relictā, dexteram repetamus, ligno vitae transgressionis stipitem mutemus, paradisum intremus amentitate sua ultra gratiam secularis exuberantiae deliciosum ... ubi tanta quinis sensibus haurias delicias, ut gratanter odorifero haustu perfusa domino tuo sursum residenti proclames: “Trahe me post te, curremus in odore unguentorum tuorum.”

(SV, 4, p. 97)

(But leaving the left side, let us return to the right, let us transform the trunk of transgression into the tree of life, let us enter Paradise, in its delight and by its flowing abundance beyond all the rewards of this world. ... where all your five senses imbibe such delights, that, filled through and through with this fragrant draught, you will cry out in gratitude to your lord who abides above, “Draw me after you, may we run in the fragrance of your ointments” [Canticles 1:3].)

The trees that are a map of the plan of salvation, portraying the generation of the New Man as the mirroring repetition of the generation of the Old, effect the same transformation in real time as a result of the reading process that is the instructional dialogue. The virgin relives the original transformation of Eve into Mary, and she does so through the experience of scripture in an audio-visual theatre. Peregrinus confirms as much when he next identifies the same tree as the image of her inner and her monastic life. The virgins as “virtutum cultores” are to be seen as the same “hortus deliciarum”: “Accordingly, the Paradise I place before you is the rule of the monastic life, this garden is the harmonious communal life of holy virgins in Christ.”¹¹⁷

In addition to the repetition of Canticles 1:3 as the announcement of identification achieved, four other instances signal a similar moment either through other passages from the Song of Songs or with the words of the adorned bride from Isaiah 61:10.¹¹⁸ That the woman repeatedly ascends—through the embodied media of the instructional method—to a position of identification with the scriptural image is a reification of the vertical fusion of letter and gloss. That she cultivates the *hortus* within her as the progressive re-enactment of the salvation narrative and the Incarnation is likewise a consequence of the same reification, a reconstitution of the narrative transformation from Eve to Mary in her life. The *hortus conclusus* of Canticles 4:12—in which Rupert was able to read Mary as the new Paradise, thus inspiring the *Speculum*’s picture of the *fructus carnis et spiritus*—resurfaces in the *Speculum virginum* as the *hortus deliciarum*, a figure that equates it with the Paradise to come (in Heaven), the monastery, and the virgins’ reading lives. The woman’s body is the site of the integration of the life of the flesh into

116 To designate this function for the picture of “Mystical Paradise,” added later with parts one and two, the author hits upon the moniker *paradisus speculatorius* (SV, 2, p. 39). See Powell, “Picture Program,” pp. 152–53.

117 “Verum non solum fores premissos, id est virtutes, sed et virtutum cultores studiosos hortum istum deliciarum dixerim. ... Itaque paradisus, quem propono, monasticae vitae regula est, hortus iste sanctarum virginum concors in Christo commanentia est ...” (SV, 4, p. 98).

118 SV, 3, p. 76; 6, pp. 174–75; and 1, p. 38; 4, p. 113.

that of the spirit, fulfilled through the assimilation of image/letter to life. She reifies the reading experience that Rupert first revealed through Mary in his commentary on the Song of Songs.

A Female Poetics of Body and Truth

When seen through this reading model of integration, the *audi-et-videre* address that once opened the work is revealed as far more than an expansion of Benedict's prologue to include the eye in instruction; it is an inversion of the eye and ear as the windows of Eve's seduction such that they become the instruments of "her" transformation, the extension into poetics of Mary's original inversion, the transformation of the Old into the New Eve.¹¹⁹ When the *audi-et-videre* address states that Christ seeks "open eyes and open ears," so that what is heard and what is seen are drawn from the outer to the inner world to form the consummate bride, it describes the same process that elsewhere accomplishes continuity in rupture between the seductive wives of worldly women and the inner beauty of the virgin, the use of mirrors there, the use of scripture and picture here, the woman as body and the body as woman's mirror.

The method reproduces over and over again this essential doubling of the female gaze as the implicit rationale for the necessary integration of a female dependency on the flesh and the senses into the life of the spirit. The oppositional pairs that shape the instructive project are all alternative remanifestations of the analogy in opposition between Eve's seduction and religious instruction. The woman's way of knowing the Word attends to and seeks the latter through the former and discovers in the process the "special" meaning that this "conjunction of divergent natures" brings to her understanding of her spiritual life.¹²⁰ The original "mirror" of this process in the treatment of the daughters of Sion itself contains the seductive instrument mirror as one of the women's ornaments—what Tertullian had called "the baggage of woman in her condemned and dead state." Like the continuity between secular and religious roles that became characteristic of female religious experience, women's reading was a figure of continuity in rupture, of integration between opposite poles: "In hac itaque carnis et spiritus coniunctione vel disiunctione vigilandum est Christi virgini" (Thus to this conjoining and separation of spirit and flesh Christ's virgins should give their utmost attention) (SV, 8, p. 221).

The figure of the woman reader has attracted considerable attention in study of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this attention has focused primarily on vernacular literature and has thus generally substituted the replica for the original and overlooked or misunderstood the substance of the transfer between them. In a contribution

119 The contrast between Eve's seduction through the voice of the serpent and Mary's conception of Christ through the voice of Gabriel is a constant of the tradition of the *conceptio per aurem* from the earliest witnesses onward; see Constas, *Proclus*, pp. 282–90; also Steinberg, "Filippo Lippi's 'Annunciation,'" 26–27.

120 The opening of part 6 features the relationship between the five bodily senses and their inner spiritual equivalents as a "coniunctae naturae discrepantia vel discrepantis naturae coniunctio" (SV, 6, p. 161).

investigating the woman reader as cast in Richard of Fournival's *Bestiaire d'amours* and its anonymous *Response*—a multilayered persiflage of the complicity between models of reading sacred and profane in later thirteenth-century France—Helen Solterer identifies in its “figure of the woman reader” an innovative “iconoclasm” that “suggests in its widest terms a physical recasting of epistemology.”¹²¹ This woman reader “reclaims her senses as a mode of self-defense,” an attitude towards sensory experience that affirms value in all its vehicles and rehabilitates women's habitual vice, *curiositas*, to restore it to a more neutral semantic field.¹²²

Just as it is characteristic of the quality and nature of girls ... to cultivate curiosity above other vices, and to tend to their frivolous trifles before a mirror, so also the virgins of Christ gladly contemplate whatever similitude or analogy through which visible things may be transformed into invisible ones such that they be excited to the perfection of virtues.

(SV, 7, p. 220)

Behind Richard's playful manipulation of an audio-visual form and the genres of instruction (the bestiary) and seduction (the love letter) lay a tradition of women's “special” relationship to the voice and truth of scripture that was well over a century old. The physical recasting of epistemology in the figure of the woman-as-reader occurred in the monastic culture of the early twelfth century.

In the patristic discourse on woman and body, women's proclivity for ornament and exterior charms was an expression of depravity *sui generis* because it further multiplied the sin, manifest in her bodiliness, that she brought into the world. For Tertullian, merely to catalogue all manner of luxuriant finery known to the early Christian world was to render transparent his abhorrence of Eve and her sex. The *Speculum's* woman reader, it should be clear, is not presented with a reversal of the value of ornament itself. What was formerly depraved is not now “good.” But depravity is no longer the inescapable consequence of the woman's position. She is given a different way of understanding the role of the body in her own life:

“Omnis igitur gloria filiae regis ab intus,” quia illum, qui facit aeternaliter beatos et gloriosos, possidet intus. Sicut enim Christus humana fragilitate deitatem celavit, et vili indumento “speciosum forma prae filiis hominum,” sic virgo Christi, mundo foris despecta, mundi conditorie plena est. ... Quid igitur opus habent virgines Christi olosericis indumentis vel aurotexta ciclade superius amirici, armilla, anulis, inaruibis margaritarum granis splendentibus onerari, cum sacramentis spiritalibus fulgeant interius, quorum summa omnium est Christus?

(SV, 3, p. 63)

(“For all the splendor of the king's daughter comes from within” [Psalm 44:14], because within she possesses him who grants eternal grace and glory. Just as Christ hid his divinity in the frailty of human flesh, concealing “his beauteous form from the sons of men”

121 “Medieval Senses,” 129–45 at 142. On the *Bestiaire d'amours* as understood here, see above, pp. 1–2 and Powell, “Instruction for Religious Women,” pp. 343–57.

122 Solterer, “Medieval Senses,” 142. For the frequent association of *curiositas* with woman and Eve's failing within contemporary instructional literature, see Newman, “Golden Bowl,” 119.

[Psalm 44:3], under this wretched garment, so the virgin of Christ, abject to the eyes of the world, bears within the world's creator. ... What need then, have the virgins of Christ to wrap themselves in garments of pure silk, to don a stately cloak worked in gold, or to adorn themselves with bracelets or rings or earrings hung with brilliant pearls, when they shine from within with the light of the spiritual sacraments whose essence is Christ himself?)

The body that willingly humbles itself and assumes an abject exterior joins Christ in the Incarnation. This body is no longer irretrievably a vile cover or deceptive exterior but rather can become the diaphanous vehicle of divinity and truth: Christ, born within, "shines" through it. The true virgin of Christ in this way reveals her own beauty, her own radiating ornament—evoked over and over again in the text through a visual idea, that of inner virtue manifest in the body as light radiating through material form. As Peregrinus says of the ornament that consists in the harmony between faith and action: "Iunge utrumque et deo placebis ex utroque. ... Fulget alterum ex altero et fit ornatus communis utriusque collatio" (Join the two together and you will please God in both. ... The one shines forth through the other, and from the combination results their reciprocal beauty) (*SV*, 3, p. 78). Or again, of the ornament afforded by a pure mind in a chaste body: "alterum splendeat ex altero et compositione specierum ornatus communis augeatur" (The one shines through the other and the combination of two substances increases the beauty of each) (*SV*, 3, p. 73). As Theodora affirms, "Magnus decor iste virginis, in quo deus homini coniungitur" (Great is this beauty of the virgin, in which God joins himself to humanity) (*SV*, 3, p. 73).

Such beauty radiating from within mirrors Christ's bodily divinity because it manifests a perfect accord between will and action, between inner truth and outer form. The gold ring that encloses a radiant gemstone—as the ornament bestowed on betrothal, whether of secular or sacred brides—becomes the archetypal symbol of women's perfection: "What then, is the precious stone enclosed in gold if not a pure heart enclosed in a chaste body?"¹²³ Woman as body lives in the peril of an immanently corruptible nature; her spiritual task is thus constantly to seek this state of perfect integrity, a state in which she again embodies the Word as it was originally embodied in Mary's flesh. The continuity with secular roles and desires in the female religious life is only one manifestation of a continuity between woman in the carnal and woman in the spiritual life that stems from the inability to renounce the flesh. The abject exterior, an exterior that abnegates its very exteriority, acknowledges woman as humanity's physicality and marks this as weakness and incapacity before God; it manifests the inner humility that is then the only true mirror of her outward state. This position does not renounce or revile the flesh but rather embraces it—as Christ did—as the true nature of humanity. The body contemplates itself as the available mirror of divinity. By injecting the woman-as-reader into the patristic epistemology of gender, twelfth-century monasticism reversed the significance of "the question of woman" for the question "of reading in the literary history of the West."¹²⁴

¹²³ "Quid est enim lapis pretiosus in auro nisi pudica mens in corpore casto?" (*SV*, 3, p. 73).

¹²⁴ Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, pp. 47–48.

This shift from the abhorrence of the exterior, of embodiment, to a position that abhors only discontinuity in representation between the idea and its embodiment thus proceeds from the same understanding of woman's position and shares the same structural order of importance, as that noted earlier from self-renunciation to self-contemplation. It is fundamental to the formulation of woman's spiritual experience and generates an entire complex of metaphors centring on the inner truth and outer form, the primacy of intention in virtuous action, the dangers of worldly praise and, once again, the mirror as the image of the desired continuity between flesh and spirit, as between self-image and *imago Dei*. These are the terms that, from this point on, define the spiritual life of the "New Eve."

The imperilled, corruptible state that is immanent in the woman's position is featured most frequently in the *Speculum virginum*—and elsewhere—in two ways: as the imperative preservation of her bodily integrity, that is, her virginity; and as the desire to please and her resultant susceptibility to praise. These latter represent the flesh as seductress and seduced, respectively, and therefore reveal the weakness that most often endangers the former. To please and be praised are behavioural manifestations of woman's attraction to the exterior—both tendencies find their place in the *Speculum* as equally central to women's religious vocations. The desire to please makes women adopt false exteriors, whether in ornament or action; in the virgin's instruction it is made the motivator—*quomodo placeat deo*—of her inner adornment in the virtues. The attraction to the exterior makes women susceptible to others' deceits; in the *Speculum virginum* it is the basis of their use of the mirror, "whatever ... analogy by which visible things may be transformed into invisible ones."

Virginity itself is the sign of the vulnerable body, "the glass that is shattered with one blow."¹²⁵ The woman preserves both beauty and bodily integrity for the bridegroom, Christ, and does so literally, because she is the embodied bride. The imperative of continuity between inner intention and outer form—outer form being, in this case, bodily virginity or good works—is a rejection of bodily integrity or outward beauty as meriting reward in themselves. The woman who understands these latter as her own accomplishments rather than as the gift of her creator is as false as the flatterers who encourage her with their praise.¹²⁶ Thus, virginity as the vulnerable body, the false exterior, and "false praise" are intrinsically linked and mark a trajectory towards spiritual perfection that is essentially female.

Speaking in terms of poetics, the ideas of woman's body as exterior form and her task as the realization of the diaphanous body mean that both woman and representational forms retain integrity through the abject exterior, the one that seeks no praise, acknowledging its own baseness. Truth is manifest in the rejection of ornament and rhetorical eloquence but also of learning and letters, ideas that will figure largely in the justification

¹²⁵ The idea is a commonplace; I cite it here from Gautier de Coincy, *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, vol. 3, p. 490, lines 788–89.

¹²⁶ These ideas recur throughout the *Speculum virginum* and are also made the subject of part 6, within the explication of the parable of the Wise and the Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). See esp. SV, 6, pp. 162–65, 172–73. The same complex of ideas is central to Abelard's pastoral concern for Heloise and her sisters at the Paraclete; see Powell, "Listening to Heloise," pp. 269–78.

of vernacular literature. The “reader” who corresponds to this idea of representation through the body diaphanous is the *mulier indocta* or *laica illiterata*, the body that is simple in its understanding not by negligence or mere ignorance, but by virtue of an incapacity that redeems the sensory means on which it depends—Ooliba on the way to becoming the *adulescentula*. We encountered her in singularly exalted form as Hildegard of Bingen; she will recur in vernacular literature both inside and outside the narrative, as protagonist and as audience.

Gregory's apology for visual art lends itself in the *Speculum* to this same notion of woman as monastic *laicus*. *Idiotas* and *ignorantes ... qui litteras nesciunt* came to be understood as referring to laymen generally in opposition to clerics or *doctores*; in this way women were perpetual illiterates because they were never *clericus*.¹²⁷ But, as we have seen, the equation is more properly understood the other way around: laymen, as illiterates, are in fact a special category of woman as the sex that embodies humanity's weakness and insufficiency before God, humanity as bound to the body and dependent on the physical senses. A corollary thus emerges that we will find exploited in later chapters: laymen, in as much as they are “illiterates,” are epistemologically female. This is the equation that makes the recasting of *lectio* for monastic women so readily accessible as the poetics of a layman's way of knowing the Word, how the woman-as-audience, the central concern of the *Speculum virginum*, could become an audience-as-woman in vernacular literature. The articulation of a spiritual path particular to the nature of woman as monastic *laicus* contains an implicit rehabilitation of the secular and vernacular, of the spiritual value of lay experience, which corresponds to yet another instance of reification, or the play between metaphor and experience.

The reading method of the *Speculum virginum* witnesses the woman as body seeking the integrity of the body in visible forms as the traces, the *vestigia*, of her absent beloved. They are her mirror. Part 1 identifies this woman reader through the scriptural figure of the *sponsa derelicta*:

Sit igitur laudis divinæ confessio operum eius considerata magnitudo, ubi ratio ipsa *visum intuentis* in sapiente prevenit quia ex consideratione rerum visibilium, quod futurum est purificatæ mentis intellectu iam precurrit. Ubi dum virgo licet in hac carne posita steterit, *interiori mentis auditu* sponsum clamantem attendit: “Non vocaberis ultra derelicta et terra tua non vocabilitur amplius desolata.”

(SV, 1, p. 29, emphasis added)

(Therefore from the contemplation of the greatness of his creation comes the outpouring of his praise, wherever the viewer's gaze is endowed with a reasoning mind, for that which will be is prefigured in the understanding of a pure heart through the contemplation of visible things. In which place once a virgin, though she remain in the world of the flesh, has established herself, she hears the voice of the bridegroom calling, “You shall no longer be called the forsaken one and no more shall your land be called desolate” [Isaiah 62:4].)

In the corporeal forms of this world, the audio-visual call to the bride comes directly from the bridegroom. This possibility is the bride's assurance that she is not truly forsaken,

¹²⁷ For Gregory's text, see pp. 44–45, above.

and serves as consolation for the physical loss her religious life requires. In response to a dubious inquiry from Theodora, Peregrinus gives this quasi-widowed state special emphasis:

Numquid non videtur tibi virginitas quodammodo ex hoc derelicta, quæ licet sponso cælesti desponsata coniugalis gratiæ vel prolis manet tamen penitus ignara? Totius humanæ culturæ vel sementis nescia est ac per hoc ad multiplicandos filios Adæ penitus infecunda est. Itane menti tuæ querimonia lugubris excidit, quam vox una feminarum sterilium in veteri lege coram domino effudit se derelictas a deo conquerentium, quia sterilitate ventris earum populus dei non accepit incrementum?

(SV, 1, pp. 29–30)

(Does the state of virginity not seem to you forsaken in that a virgin, though she be betrothed to the heavenly bridegroom, remains utterly without experience of the grace of marriage and offspring? Of human conception and reproduction she knows nothing and is therefore entirely infertile for the increase of the sons of Adam. Has your heart forgotten the mournful lament that the infertile women of the old law poured forth as if in one voice before God, lamenting that He had forsaken them, because the sterility of their wombs had stopped the increase of God's people?)

Here again the virgins' position is not affirmed through negative representation of its alternative, the secular roles of women. The passage instead directly addresses the depth of deprivation felt by the infertile woman through the lamenting voices of Sarah and Rachel in the Old Testament. This mourning lament is made the virgins' own in preparation for the consolation offered in the ensuing discussion of marriage and birth in the Spirit. "Thus women reached God not by reversing what they were but by sinking more fully into it."¹²⁸

As Augustine had written: "The entire church is a widow, whether men or women, husbands or wives, whether young people or the aged or virgins: all the church is a widow, forsaken in this world."¹²⁹ Thus the woman as "widowed bride" is a figure of all humanity, the church, but she remains no less a figure of her own bodily experience. She replicates in her own life the scriptural metaphors of the Fall, the Incarnation and salvation. The reification of the strategy of audience response defined as feminine identification produces a mirror experience in which the woman contemplates images of self as metaphors for the transformation from flesh into spirit and completes these metaphors as bodily transformation.

The life of the woman as a progression towards epiphany in the body thus constitutes a narrative dimension of the scriptural image, the rediscovery of coherence in the disjoint images of the Song and the prophets as a model of reading and viewing. The *sponsa derelicta*, or widowed bride, is herself a figure of the fusion between the bridal metaphor of Christian experience and its narrative, or "historical" dimension. In the use of this figure the experience offered the female religious through the instructional

¹²⁸ Bynum, "And Woman," p. 274; see also Newman, "Golden Bowl," 26–27.

¹²⁹ "Tota ecclesia una uidua est, siue in uiris, siue in feminis, siue in coniugatis, siue in maritatis feminis, siue in adolescentibus, siue in senibus, siue in virginibus: omnis ecclesia una uidua est, deserta in hoc saeculo" (Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 131.23, p. 1923).

process of the *Speculum virginum* joins both in media and in conception that offered the user or users of the St Albans Psalter, to be considered next. There the experience of the widowed bride is presented such that both the medium (vernacular narrative) and the content make it immediate and accessible, linguistically and conceptually. It is placed alongside a pictorial narrative of the history of salvation that fulfils essentially the same functions. The entire assemblage of images and texts serves the recreation of an aesthetic experience equated with that of dramatic performance, another multi-medial translation through which the woman-as-reader completes her spiritual ascent as *sponsa corporaliter*.

In the *Speculum virginum*, what we have seen is the missing third dimension of the relationship between text and auditor, picture and viewer: the performance in which scriptural imagery is rendered as personal experience and the receptive act is a continuing process of assimilation of letter to life. The woman's life is a narrative re-enactment of the fusion of letter and gloss, *sponsa* (body) and *sponsus* (head/soul), flesh and spirit. She identifies affectively with the images and metaphors of this abstract ascent from letter to spirit and seeks to make them continuous with her own experience, re-embodying the original *historia* that constitutes their fulfilment. Because she embodies the metaphor, her life as narrative is a figure of the same progression—recast not as a reading process in which cognition accomplishes the renunciation of the image but as experience that is communicable as such through the retention of its corporeality. This is as much as to say that in the woman, the reading experience of the *clericus/litteratus* becomes physically apprehensible as narrative, as “our” *historia*.

Chapter 4

SEEKING THE READER/VIEWER OF THE ST ALBANS PSALTER

St Albans, a Psalter, a Life

Something happened in the 1120s at the English abbey of St Albans, not far north of London. Under an abbot of Norman origin, Geoffrey of Maine (r. 1119–1146), formerly a *magister* and schoolman of Le Mans, illustrated manuscripts “suddenly gushed forth like a released torrent.”¹ The most notable example is the St Albans Psalter (ca. 1120–ca. 1140).² For Otto Pächt, its prefatory cycle of forty full-page pictures represented an “unparalleled outburst of pictorial narrative” in Western art and as such testified to “one of the most astonishing phenomena in the history of medieval art, second in importance only to the rise of monumental sculpture.”³ To be sure, Anglo-Saxon England had boasted a rich tradition of manuscript illumination that was abruptly broken off with the Norman Conquest. In particular, the tradition of psalter illustration and the inclusion of one or more full-page pictures marking the divisions between the Psalms was ancient and apparently well developed—even if the extant examples are few.⁴ But this was not so much a revival as a completely new beginning: in style, execution, and content, “these pictures reject everything that Anglo-Saxon art had stood for”; and this above all in their representation of narrative.⁵ These were not singular, timeless scenes of largely allegorical or symbolic significance but frozen moments of time made present and real, *sacra historia* dramatically arrested for the viewer’s contemplative gaze (see [figs. 4.3–4.9](#)). For Pächt, this made St Albans into “the birthplace of a new art of storytelling,” for “wherever in twelfth-century England we come across a sequence of narrative scenes, their iconography and style invariably points back to St Albans as the fountainhead of the pictorial tradition.”⁶

By this account, the St Albans Psalter would have all but accomplished the visual turn of the twelfth century in reading and prayer. The significance of the reading Annunciate near the beginning of its picture cycle ([fig. 4.3](#)), which yielded a good deal to our attention in [chapter 2](#), thus looms potentially very large. Immediately following the picture cycle is

1 Dodwell, *Pictorial Arts*, p. 329.

2 Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1. Attempts to rename the book as the Psalter of Christina of Markyate (as I earlier did myself) or, most recently, the Markyate Psalter (see Collins and Fisher, eds. in the list of works cited), are more a hindrance than a help to continuing inquiry. On the dating, see Collins and Fisher, p. 3.

3 *Pictorial Narrative*, p. 13.

4 Openshaw, “Symbolic Illustration,” 41–60; Openshaw, “Weapons,” 17–38; Deshman, “Galba Psalter,” 109–38.

5 Dodwell, *Pictorial Arts*, p. 329.

6 *SAP*, pp. 170–71.

another vehicle of narrative renewal, the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* (fig. 4.10). The earliest extant manuscript of any monument of French vernacular literature thus occurs, on the one hand, bound into the material body of monastic prayer, the psalter, and on the other, twinned with a new art of pictured *lectio*, or visual storytelling. The visual and the vernacular turn, both in one binding: the understanding of Mary's reading agency as captured in the psalter's portrayal of the Annunciation appears to inaugurate a radical expansion in the use of images, narrative, and the vernacular, the translation of *sacra historia* into bodily media.

In the selection and treatment of its subjects, which reach from the Fall to Pentecost, the picture cycle offers much to sustain such a hypothesis. The reading Annunciate follows a two-page sequence of the Fall, identifying its narrative context as the making of the New Eve.⁷ Of the remaining thirty-seven full-page pictures, Mary appears in no fewer than nine, including oddities such as the doubling of the Flight to Egypt with a mirroring image of the return and a striking entombment scene in which Mary displaces Joseph of Arimathea to figure at the centre of the composition (fig. 4.6). Mary is likewise found at the centre of the capital events that conclude the narrative and determine humanity's continuing relationship to Christ: his Ascension and the Pentecost (figs. 4.8 and 4.9). These latter examples, while not unprecedented, constitute striking iconographic gestures of theological significance.⁸ Indeed, where Mary is not found at the centre of the images in which she appears, her experience constitutes the event portrayed (Annunciation, Nativity), with one exception: the Descent from the Cross, in which her position holding one of Christ's hands is symmetrical with John's (fig. 4.5). Other than Christ, she is the only figure portrayed within the cycle in both a three-quarter turn and full front, in the Annunciation and Pentecost, respectively.⁹ This last feature serves to arrest attention on the two pictures that allow Mary's position to frame the whole. The connection between the two is marked by another feature as well: the descending dove.

The cycle displays the story of Christ's salvation of humanity, but it does so such that a woman's body is front and centre at every possible opportunity. It is the history of the Logos on Earth, shaped no less into a history of Mary's body as the meeting place of divinity and humanity. Nowhere is this idea more imposing than in her enlarged and central intrusion in the picture of Pentecost (fig. 4.9). There she all but displaces the apostles, who appear to be as much in awe of her as they are of the event. This is Mary as Rupert named her, as *omnium Scripturarum secretarium* and *magistra magistrorum*: she seems herself to create the enabling axis between humanity and the descending dove of the Spirit, as she does at the Ascension on the facing page. Her conception of the Word through the dove at the Annunciation thus appears as the enabling predecessor of the later event. What the apostles learned at Pentecost, Mary had known, completely and perfectly, "from the beginning," and thus in some way imparts to them.

7 Connections between the two images are noted by Heslop, "Grand Tour," p. 24.

8 *SAP*, pp. 67–70; and, on the Ascension in particular, Dushman, "Disappearing Christ," 525–27.

9 One other figure, the Devil, receives a single full-face portrayal in the Harrowing of Hell. As a marker of prominence, the gesture is typical of the Alexis Master's work; see Bepler, Kidd and Geddes, *Albani Psalter* (cited hereafter as *AP*), pp. 125, 127, 174–76.

The real fountainhead of pictorial narrative thus appears to be the reading Annunciate herself; or rather, this spectacular emergence of pictorial narrative within psalter prayer is presented as a reflex of Mary's incarnatory reading. Immediately following the Old French narrative poem there is a bilingual insertion of Gregory the Great's apology for *picturae* as the scripture of the illiterate (fig. 4.11). The Psalter as a whole, with its illuminated calendar and finally the unprecedented programme of 215 historiated initials to the Psalms and other prayers, stands as if the material realization of the stereotypical equations Hildegard exploited to justify her audio-visual gnosis; that is, as if voice and vision had been translated, reified on the page as the material media suitable for the *laica et illitterata*, pictures and vernacular narrative.¹⁰ It is the new mediary compendium of the reading bride. And, what is more, this reading bride appears to be identifiable as the holy woman Christina of Markyate.

Enter the adventurous and restlessly creative abbot, Geoffrey, who, if we are to believe a text he apparently commissioned, doted on the sometime vagrant recluse, Christina, housed on the periphery of his dominion.¹¹ Such is the story told in the *vita* of Christina of Markyate, a vivid and deceptively candid portrayal of a girl's bitter struggle against parents and church authorities alike to remain a virgin bride of Christ, of her flight from home into the shelter of a hermitage, of subsequent challenges to her vow of virginity and inner chastity, and, finally, of her growing powers as a holy woman and eventual establishment as prioress of a female community at Markyate.¹² Christina's *Life* reads very much as a narrative enactment "in our day" of the *sponsa derelicta*, the virgin bride left to maintain fidelity to an endlessly absent spouse. The text, written ca. 1135–ca. 1145, and thus well within the "saint's" lifetime and contemporary with the assembly of the Psalter, prominently represents Geoffrey as almost a second protagonist; his protection and admiration finally afford security and stability to her religious vocation. The latter half of the *vita* is devoted almost entirely to the relationship between these two, which is that of chaste lovers, portrayed in highly emotional terms frequently less than flattering for the abbot. While her benefactor in material affairs, the powerful prelate is made clearly dependent on his beloved *puella's* special privilege to the presence of Christ. Several figures named in the *vita* recur in the obits of the psalter's calendar, among them Christina's parents and two brothers, and Geoffrey and Christina themselves. The case would seem clear: Christina is the psalter-reading double of Mary as the reading bride; the picture cycle and the Psalter as a whole were made for her and commissioned by Geoffrey, just as the *vita* was.¹³ More detailed inquiry confirms the first proposition over and over again; the second, oddly enough, is far less certain.

Both appear to be visually affirmed in most ingenious fashion in an initial to one of the Psalms. Now often referred to as "the Christina initial," it is the sole initial in the programme to exhibit no connection to the psalm it begins, Psalm 105; no more, that is,

¹⁰ For detailed discussion, see Powell, "Media and Presence."

¹¹ *Vie de Christina de Markyate*, 2:15–21. The text is cited from this edition, abbreviated hereafter as *VCM*.

¹² See the preceding note.

¹³ On date and patronage of the *vita*, see *VCM*, 2:15–21, also 42–44, 66–68.

than the letter “C” in which its picture is enclosed (fig. 4.1). It shows a woman who can reach into the heavenly sphere to touch the right hand of Christ, while a group of monks crowded behind her looks on with intent interest. The inscription, *Parce tuis queso monachis clementia iesu* (O Jesus, I beseech you in your mercy to spare your monks), would then clarify that what we see is Christina interceding with Christ on the monks’ behalf—apparently from her position still among them in this life. Beyond its visual realization of the *sponsa mediatrix*, the image displays intricate connections to both the *vita* and the prefatory picture cycle. Christina has a vision in the *vita* in which the central gesture of the image, her contact with Christ’s right hand, becomes a disquieting issue, precisely because the privilege appears to exclude Geoffrey, who stands on her right (*VCM*, p. 196). The echoes in textual and descriptive detail offer a convincing interpretation of, as well as an explanation for, the otherwise anomalous initial. The nature of Christina’s position between Christ and her benefactor, or benefactors, thus received explicit commemoration in the Psalter.¹⁴

The same image is no less striking as visual homage to the picture cycle.¹⁵ From the colours and type of her clothing to the positioning and rendering of her feet and hands and her oddly levitating position opposite Christ, this portrayal of Christina is a pastiche of striking features in the picture cycle and, in particular, a copy of Mary within it. Yet the Alexis Master, whose masterpiece is the psalter’s picture cycle, was not one of the two artists of the psalm initials, nor did either of these latter create this stylistic and physical intrusion on their work: the image is painted on a parchment patch that was pasted over an earlier initial that had first been carefully scraped away.¹⁶ Features of its style as well as the hand of its inscription may indicate it was executed some twenty to thirty years later.¹⁷ It is possibly even a posthumous portrayal—is Christina shown moving beyond the earthly sphere? Whatever the circumstances were, someone assimilated the visual insignia of the picture cycle to the portrayal of Christina *sponsa et mediatrix* and used this idea as a way of inserting her presence into the psalm section of the codex—a good many years after that section’s completion. Put differently: someone styled Christina as the ideal viewer of the picture cycle at some point after the two independent sections had been combined in one book.¹⁸ *Sacra historia* has assimilated to the reading bride, or she appears as if re-embodying it “in our day.” As we will see shortly, this latter idea, too, finds an emphatic complement in the *vita*.

Oddly, though, the “Christina initial” is in one way not exceptional: its after-the-fact adaptation is rather the rule where Christina’s presence in the codex can be ascertained. The artist may have borrowed its central gesture from the initial to the litany, where, once

¹⁴ Powell, “Media and Presence,” 352–53.

¹⁵ For more detail on the following points see Powell, “Media and Presence,” 353–54.

¹⁶ Powell, “Making the Psalter,” 352; also Kidd in *AP*, pp. 105–6.

¹⁷ Powell, “Making the Psalter,” 353; Thomson, *Manuscripts*, p. 35; and Ayres, “Angevin Style,” 215–16.

¹⁸ The psalm section and the picture cycle are clearly separate projects, sharing neither artist nor scribe and the former possibly a decade earlier.



Figure 4.1. Initial to Psalm 105, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1150. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 285.¹⁹

again, a woman at the forefront of a community, this time of praying women, can alone reach across a boundary to access a space occupied by the Holy Trinity (fig. 4.2).²⁰ This image has been no less convincingly identified with a passage from the *vita* of Christina, and yet it is the work of one of the psalter artists.²¹ Close inspection shows, however, that the litany initial was originally laid out differently. The illustrated area was enlarged at some point rather drastically to accommodate this scene, in which, if the usual interpretation is correct, Geoffrey is once again also present. Even the obits in the calendar, often taken *a priori* as solid evidence of her ownership and use of the Psalter, may have been added all at once as part of a campaign to appropriate the codex for Christina.²² Or should we sooner say: to commemorate her as the reading bride?

¹⁹ See p. 52 note 32.

²⁰ On this and the following see Kidd in *AP*, pp. 108–9; Powell, “Media and Presence,” 349–52; and Powell, “Making the Psalter,” 319–21.

²¹ See Powell, “Visual,” 349–51 and earlier literature cited there; also *AP*, pp. 108–9, 213–14.

²² Kidd in *AP*, pp. 68–69, 119–20; *contra* Gerry, “Cult and Codex,” pp. 87–88.

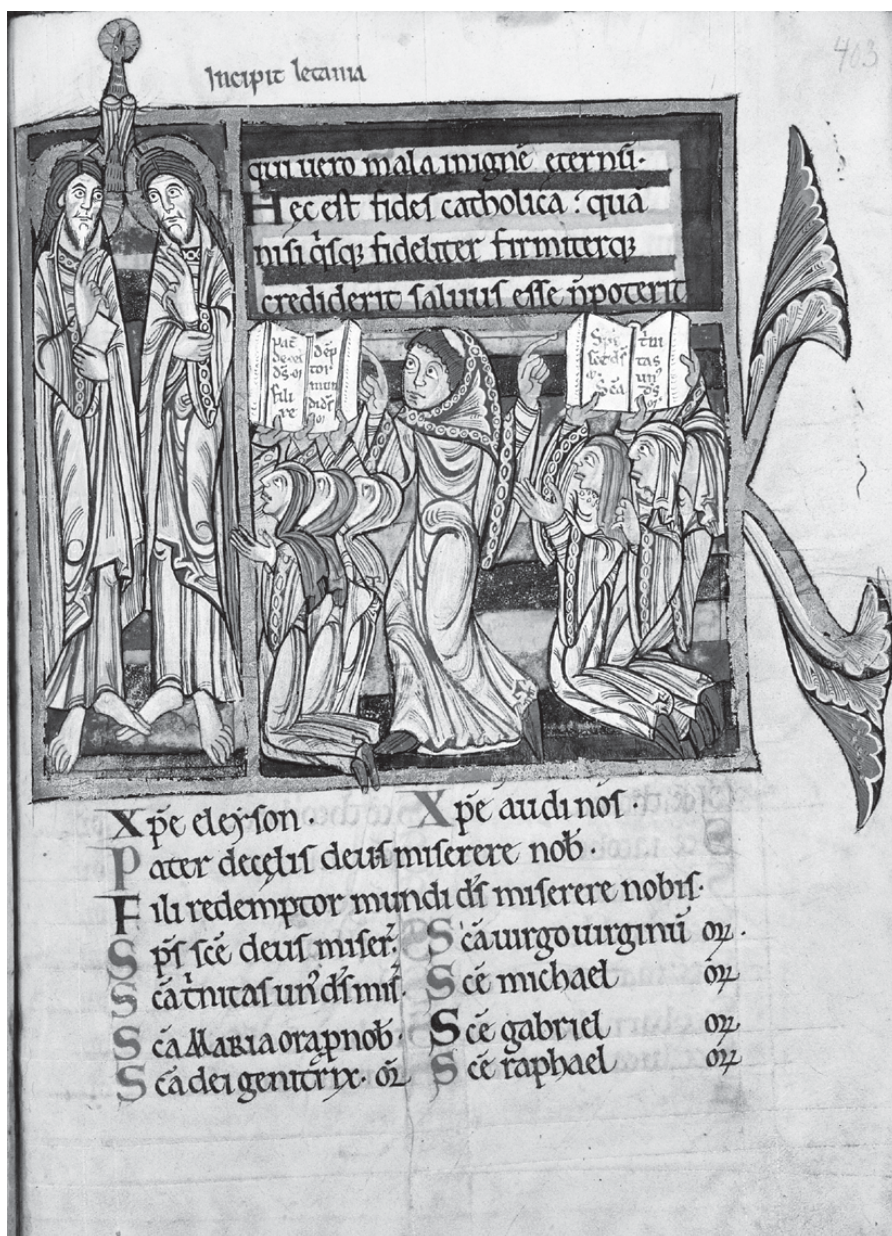


Figure 4.2. Initial to the Litany, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 403.

The St Albans Psalter, for all its spectacular qualities, is an oddly composite book with curiously unfinished or unresolved seams between its parts, duplications that defy simple explanation, and a number of clearly ad-hoc modifications and additions.²³ The more I have studied the subject, the more I have become convinced of two things: first, the four parts of the Psalter and the *vita*, all products of one scriptorium and showing significant chronological overlap, became, at some point, collaborators in one campaign: the establishment of Christina as *sponsa et mediatrix*. Second, the connection of the Psalter to Christina is more likely constructed than real, that is, it results largely from this campaign and only minimally (if at all) from the circumstances of her biography or from her personal needs in reading and prayer.²⁴ Both the book and the *Life of Christina* reveal, above all, the varying facets of a reading persona, the woman who reads in and through the body as a figure of humanity, the bride who is allowed in this world a special bodily knowledge of Christ. This figure is the focal point of the Psalter's multimedia display no less than it is the model for the *vita*'s idealized portrayal of Christina. Its pertinence to the Psalter does not properly derive from the idea of Christina as the posited recipient or user but rather is created and defined in the texts and images themselves. Psalter and *vita* together are vivid testimony to the intense interest of the male monastic world in a woman's privilege to the presence of the Word and, above all, in the mediary expansion of reading that "she" enabled.

The Christina initial fuses the visual display of the Psalter with a portrayal of the specific import of the woman's position in relation to knowledge of the divine. As such, it implies a poetics of the visual specific to that position, and in this regard it is not so much an intruder as an image of the entire Christina phenomenon, the way one woman's experience comes to serve as the focal point just described. The most striking elements and episodes of both the *vita* and the codex can be seen to support one idea, a poetics of the woman-as-viewer in which women's desire effects a bodily knowing in physical presence, a reincarnation of *sacra historia* that appears to find its material consequences and accessories in the Psalter's picture cycle and, above all, in its prototype, the Emmaus sequence found in the Alexis Quire (figs. 4.12–4.14). The specific presentation and treatment of the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* reveal it as a narrative analogue of this idea; or rather, as I will argue, the *Chanson* and the Emmaus sequence present the central arguments for this entire reading model, they represent its preliminary justification and articulation.

As a hinge-text, a narrative poised between monastic and secular audiences, as it is between Latin psalter and *chanson*, prayer and public performance, the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* points directly to the chapters to come and is my main object of interest in this one. The St Albans Psalter thus provides us with an uncannily effective bridge

²³ For a summary, see Kidd in *AP*, pp. 139–43; also Powell, "Making the Psalter"; and Gerry, "Psalmist," pp. 219–48.

²⁴ Such judgments must always distinguish between the different parts of the Psalter. In particular the making of the calendar and the Alexis Quire may well be more biographically connected to Christina. On the calendar, see Morgan, "Patronage and Ownership," pp. 54–58; on the Alexis Quire, see Powell, "Making the Psalter," 299–319.

between the two halves of this investigation. But in addition to this, taken together with the representation of Christina in the *vita*, it shows us the construction of the woman as psalter-reader as a material project, as full-fledged implementation of visual media and performed texts. The elements I will examine here, the *vita*'s account of Christina's experience of *sacra historia*, the picture cycle, the Emmaus sequence, and the *Chanson* all represent varying approaches to reading in *historia*, each implying an embrace of corporeal representation and identification that is equally the embrace of a female reading self, favoured over and even explicitly contrasted with a position of male self-renunciation. As we found at the end of the last chapter: the bride lends her body to the *lectio* of the male and the result is woman as the narrative embodiment of reading experience. The intently constructed doubling of this figure with the biography of a contemporary woman makes codex and *vita* into mirroring images of a receptive instance that truly exists only between the two, the woman-as-reader as reinvented within monastic culture of the twelfth century. We will encounter the same figure, as a rule suspended in the same productive ambiguity between figurative and historical existence, in the construction of a female audience for vernacular texts, successors at the secular courts of France and Germany to the *Chanson de Saint Alexis*.

Pictures, *Sacra historia*, and Reading as Mary Did

In the last episode of the incomplete *vita*, Christina effectively accomplishes a reincarnation of the Word within and for her monastic community, and she does so as if in fulfilment of the promise of the *audi-et-videre* opening of the *Speculum virginum*: the bride conceives and bears the Word as life. This same episode, which I have elsewhere called "Emmaus at Markyate,"²⁵ exhibits Christina's devotional life as if it were the narrative counterpart of the initial to Psalm 105 in the Psalter: that is, as if it consisted of the re-embodiment of episodes of *sacra historia* through the desirous meditation of the reading bride. Taken together, then, the two ideas suggest that the picture cycle itself arises from a similar understanding and that Mary's reading act is indeed its origin.

Christina twice receives "a certain pilgrim" as her guest at Markyate, and the description and progression of events leave no doubt that these two episodes and a third, in which he reappears only to mysteriously disappear from inside the Markyate church, show Christina reliving the story of Christ's post-resurrection appearance in the guise of a pilgrim to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32).²⁶ That is, she relives the Emmaus story in a highly nuanced reinterpretation current at St Albans, one that is elaborated here no less than it is in the Alexis Quire, beginning opposite the conclusion of the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* (figs. 4.12–4.14). The three pictures of one Gospel episode parallel the *vita*'s account of three separate appearances of a pilgrim. But through the resulting intervals between the Markyate visits, a Gospel narrative on the presence and

²⁵ Powell, "Media and Presence," 346–47.

²⁶ *VCM*, 1:196–202.

absence of the bodily Word is recast as one on the power of women's desire to restore that presence to their lives.²⁷

With the pilgrim's second appearance, the story incorporates another Gospel event, which also effects a gender shift, as Christina and her sister Margaret are seen to embody Mary and Martha serving Christ at Bethany (Luke 10:38–42), referred to in the *vita* as service of his humanity (*humanitatis officio*).²⁸ The combination of the two stories fuses the question of recognition at Emmaus with the behaviour of women as archetypes of Christian faith, and further with a complex of interchangeable *historiae*—a confusion of suppers and Marys and of serving and anointing women in the different Gospel accounts—that were inseparable from the notion of *infirmioris sexus praerogativa*, women's privilege to Christ's physical presence.²⁹ This also allows the narrator to pause over the women's delight in the pilgrim's beauty and manners, and then, during the second interval, over their longing for his return. Christina's longing becomes a lovesickness so severe that it confines the visionary virgin to bed, not on the occasion of Easter, as the Emmaus story would require, but rather at the approach of Christmas.³⁰

The scene is thus set for Christina to relive the capital events of Christian knowing, the conception and birth of Christ, and finally, in the final disappearance, the Ascension. Because Christina is confined to bed, two monks perform the liturgy of the Christmas vigil at her bedside, and the scene takes shape as if the embodied aspiration of this "vigilating" choir, with Mary, "the recumbent virgin," about to give birth in their midst.³¹ The Word incarnate is then brought forth from the heart in the hearing and seeing of the bride.

The choir's chanting fuels a steady crescendo of Christina's desire, leading to the conception through the ear: "audit inter cetera" the passage continues, "totaque mente concipit versiculum hore none speciale scilicet singularis illius feste gaudium: 'Hodie sciatis quia veniet Dominus'" (among the other versicles she heard and conceived with her entire soul that special one from the hour of None that expresses the singular joy of this feast, "Today you shall know of the coming of the Lord").³² This unleashes within her the indescribable joy that Mary must have felt:

No sooner had she perceived that versicle's meaning than she was transported by such spiritual joy that for the rest of the day and the following night, her heart was bent continuously on meditations of this sort: Oh, at what hour will the Lord come? Oh, how will He come? Who shall see Him when He comes?³³

²⁷ As argued in Powell, "Blindness and Insight," pp. 249–78.

²⁸ *VCM*, 1:196.

²⁹ On the suppers at Bethany and in the house of Simon, see below, pp. 145–46 and 154.

³⁰ *VCM*, 1:198.

³¹ "Cumque decumbenti virgini horas vigilie dominice psallerent," *VCM*, 1:198. See also Fulton, "Quae est ista," 117.

³² *VCM*, 1:198.

³³ "Cuius versiculi percepto sensu tanto spirituali gestivit gaudio ut in residuo die vel in subsequenti nocte vix ab ejus corde hujusmodi meditationes exciderent: 'O qua hora veniet Dominus? O quomodo veniet? Quis videbit venientem?'" (*VCM*, 1:198).

And so on, such that her longing for “her pilgrim” finally identifies its true object. All the while Christina remains ill and confined to bed, for relief comes only with the actual birth. What the editors can reconstruct of the mutilated text then reads, “cum audiret Cristina, ‘Christus natus est’ sic videt Christum natum, ac se ad illius Nativitatis gaudium comperit invitatum. Morbo enim omni sublato, tanta spirituali jocunditate perfusa est” (When Christina *heard*, “Christ is born,” she also *saw* the newborn Christ, and realized that she had been invited to the joy of His birth. Her illness vanished and she was filled with such spiritual happiness).³⁴ Christina’s *gaudium* will then culminate with the physical return of her pilgrim on Christmas day, an event to which she has in effect “given birth” for her community.³⁵

It is difficult to imagine how such a description could go farther, that is, how it could more fully embody the spiritual birth, combine this with the experience of the liturgy as Mary’s conception and birth, and somehow embed the whole in the contemporary monastic life. This is Mary’s reading *non plus ultra*; it takes Hildegard’s understanding of the experience of Rupert’s *quaedam adulescentula* to a new extreme of the embodied bride, the *sponsa corporaliter*. The incorporation of the Emmaus story into the *vita* thus reads as if the narrative fulfilment of an idea that, in the Psalter, pertains only as a suggestive possibility: that the Annunciation of the picture cycle stands to introduce the entire Psalter as a mediary compendium serving the renewal of Mary’s reading. By relating an episode in Christina’s life as if it displayed the re-embodiment of four different events of *sacra historia*, the narrative appears even to function as the account of such practice fulfilled; one is tempted to see the pictures in the Psalter as the accessories of a visual *lectio divina* that itself inspired Christina’s experience.³⁶ But this would once again take the *vita* as history rather than *historia*.

No such transgression is necessary, however, to establish how closely the pictures can be associated with female desire for presence in *sacra historia* and with the technique prescribed to conjure it. There exists a vivid account of visualizing meditation for religious women in Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, written, ostensibly, for his sister, ca. 1160.³⁷ While not so precocious as the St Albans picture cycle, this text is nevertheless the earliest example we possess of serial meditations on scenes from the life of Christ.³⁸ The St Albans cycle, while rarely noted as such, is the earliest extant narrative picture cycle to have possibly served the same purpose. The striking similarities between the two include both the selection of the scenes and their treatment; they have been noted often and accounted for at some length.³⁹ My objective is to discover

34 *VCM*, 1:198

35 Powell, “Media and Presence,” p. 346; Powell, “Blindness and Insight,” p. 270.

36 Thus I interpreted the situation in Powell, “Media and Presence,” p. 346.

37 “Ego certe qui tibi carne et spiritu frater sum, ... faciam quod hortaris” (*De institutione inclusarum* 1, p. 637).

38 Edsall, “Reading,” p. 171.

39 Carrasco, “Imagery,” 73–75; also Powell, “Media and Presence,” 355–57; earlier literature in note 51, below. The emphasis, however, has been to demonstrate that the picture cycle was designed for Christina, once a *quasi-inclusa* herself.

whether the aspects of Aelred's treatment that are most clearly gender-specific find their equivalents in the psalter's pictures. Three instances will illustrate the affinity between the two: once again, the Annunciation (fig. 4.3), the Supper at the House of Simon (fig. 4.4), and the Descent from the Cross (fig. 4.5).

The persistent objective of Aelred's text is to offer an experience that immerses the listener/viewer in a flood of presence, encouraging her not to observe and reflect, but to hear, see, touch, and even taste the reality of sacred history.⁴⁰ "Why are you standing there?" Aelred admonishes his listener on the sight of Christ prostrate and perspiring as he prays alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Run up, consume those sweet drops and lick away the dust from his feet. Do not sleep with Peter."⁴¹ Unlike the apostles then, the men, who—as Abelard, too, emphasized in his "On the authority and dignity of the holy order of nuns"—slept in the garden and fled from witnessing the Passion, while the women steadfastly followed;⁴² she should intervene and accompany, even assuage the sufferings of her saviour. This appeal is doubly gendered: the contrast to the men in the narrative stands in analogy to one between male and female viewers. For monks, such indulgence in affective, "image" meditations was generally discouraged, permissible only in "the elementary stages of sensory imagination."⁴³ The female meditant, for her part, is not only to immerse herself in the sensory "reality" of the scene, she is also to intervene and act within it in difference to the male participants.⁴⁴ Far from being merely enthralled to the literal sense, the female devotee can alter history through her own participation.

The attention to Christ's feet (licking the dust from them) might seem oddly chosen as a gesture of consolation, but it appears here as another emphatically gendered gesture. Aelred makes women's devotion to Christ's feet the particular boon accorded the female devotee and the leitmotif of their participation in his text.⁴⁵ Already at the Nativity they are to kiss the infant's feet, and the entire meditation concludes with the image of the Magdalene clasping Christ's feet at the tomb after he had first refused (*Noli me tangere*). "Linger here as long as you can, virgin" (*Rule*, 31, p. 92), are Aelred's last instructions to his meditant with regard "to things past." Gregory the Great had identified Christ's feet in the anointing scenes (which occur both at the house of the Pharisee and in three of the four versions of the supper at Bethany) with his humanity and his head with his divinity.⁴⁶ For Aelred, the image thus becomes the epitome of a specifically female devotion

40 Dumont, introduction to *La vie de récluse* [*De institutione inclusarum*], p. 26.

41 The English translation is cited from Aelred, "Rule of Life for a Recluse," here p. 88 (hereafter *Rule*).

42 *Epistres*, 7, "De auctoritate vel dignitate ordinis sanctimonialium," pp. 111–14.

43 William of St Thierry, *On Contemplating God*, p. 152. See also Hamburger, "Illustrated Prayer Book," pp. 184–90; Edsall, "Reading," pp. 138–44 and 167–71. Compare also Aelred's teaching for monks, as in the discussion of meditation and weeping over the life of Christ in *De speculo caritatis*, 41–63.

44 Carrasco, "Imagery," 74.

45 *Rule*, 31, pp. 81, 83–84, 86, 88, 92; see also Carrasco, "Imagery," 73.

46 "Potest quoque per pedes ipsum mysterium incarnationis ejus intelligi, quo divinitas terram tetigit, quia carnem sumpsit. ... Si pedes Domini mysterium incarnationis ejus accipimus, congrue per caput illius ipsa divinitas designatur," *XL Homiliarum in evangelia libri duo* 33, PL 76:1242–43.

to Christ's humanity, a point in which he also had Abelard's example to follow. Abelard makes the scene of the supper at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50) the first point of departure for his extensive exposition of “the intrinsic dignity of women” in the Gospels and, above all, for the extraordinary favour of the weaker sex with Christ—what he marvels over as “*infirmioris sexus praerogativa*.”⁴⁷ The episode at the house of Simon is unique among the various supper scenes in the Gospels for the contrast Christ draws between the male host's neglect (he did not extend the usual courtesy of washing his guest's feet) and the extremity of attention shown him by the unnamed “woman who had sinned” (Luke 7:44–47).⁴⁸ For both Aelred and Abelard, this attention to the feet becomes the woman's special point of entry into the presence of the Word. Where this privilege is denied, Aelred abjures the woman to “raise your eyes to him brimming with tears and exhort from him with deep sighs and unutterable groanings what you seek. Strive with him as Jacob did.” (*Rule*, 31, pp. 83–84). Thus the meditant is encouraged to participate in the supper at Simon's house.

The inclusion of the same scene in the St Albans cycle (fig. 4.4) is remarkable in two ways: it is unusual within psalter illustration of Christ's life,⁴⁹ and, placed at the beginning of the Passion cycle, it displaces (in terms of Gospel chronology) the supper at Bethany, where, in John 12:2–8, Mary's service is contrasted with Martha's, and where, in two other accounts, Matthew 26:6–12 and Mark 14:3–8, a woman anoints Christ's head, not his feet. The choice of scene thus allows devotion to Christ's feet—which the woman first weeps over, then dries with her hair and anoints (Luke 7:38)—to appear as the woman's privilege as opposed to the men's. With a second and more extraordinary inclusion, that of the Magdalene's Annunciation to the Apostles (fig. 4.7), the cycle contrives, as Aelred did, to frame the entire Passion sequence with demonstrations of a woman's privilege to the human presence of Christ.⁵⁰

The Psalter's scene at Simon's house visually accentuates separation between the woman's embrace of Christ's feet and the men's discourse with him: the division of the scene places the kneeling woman in a different register, almost in a different plane of reality, from the other participants, a separation bridged only by Christ's foot. In this way it somewhat surprisingly recalls what occurs in the “Christina” initial and the *vita's* account of her privilege to Christ's right hand, except that in the supper scene the division would not be between men and a woman as between Heaven and earth but rather between the men with Christ and the woman who cannot sit at the same table, but is nevertheless physically and affectively closer to him. Aelred uses the later supper at Bethany to underline a similar contrast. Returning once again to Mary's embrace of the

⁴⁷ *Epistres*, 7, pp. 108–9.

⁴⁸ In medieval tradition the woman's identity was firmly established as Mary Magdalene.

⁴⁹ Carrasco, “Imagery,” 69; see also the note following.

⁵⁰ *AP*, p. 168. The same two scenes form beginning and end of Abelard's presentation on the dignity of women in the Gospels; cf. Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, pp. 108–10, 114–15. Neither scene appeared in the (sole) comparable contemporary (or slightly earlier) picture cycle, known from its description as the Psalter of Sigardus. The Crucifixion did, along with the Descent; see Wormald, “Illuminated Psalters,” 22–24, nos. 12–13, 20–22, 25–26.



Figure 4.3. Annunciation, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 19.



Figure 4.4. The Supper at the House of Simon the Pharisee, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 36.



Figure 4.5. The Descent from the Cross, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 47.



Figure 4.6. The Deposition, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 48.



Figure 4.7. Mary Magdalene's Annunciation to the Apostles, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 51.



Figure 4.8. The Ascension, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 54.



Figure 4.9. Pentecost, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 55.

feet, he has Christ silence the men's objections, saying, "I am wholly taken up with Mary and she with me" (*Rule*, 31, p. 86).

There are few to no signs within the St Albans picture cycle of an intended viewer. I am arguing that this scene stands out, then, among the rest; indeed, it was chosen and represented in this way to suggest identification between the woman at Christ's feet and the viewer, and to offer "her" this point of entry into the Gospel narrative. Moreover, the peculiar figure standing on the frame at the left offers another such indication: not a second woman (as with Mary and Martha at Bethany), but a servant has been interpolated into the account. This might suggest the quality of the devotion involved and anticipate the complementary gesture at Bethany, in which the woman will (also) anoint Christ's head. Either figure, woman or servant, offers an avenue of identification on the margins, but the servant is doubly unique: he has no equivalent in the Gospel accounts, and he accomplishes a connection between the image and the space beyond it in two ways nowhere else repeated: his left hand crosses under the frame (and not over it, as his foot and the woman's do) to touch Christ, while his right arm reaches entirely beyond the border and into the empty parchment space. A "genre figure," then, one with no other particular identity, observes the scene from the threshold, as if entering from the outside.⁵¹ This viewer would be a man aspiring to a woman's embrace of Christ.

Another striking conjunction between the two cycles occurs in the Descent from the Cross (fig. 4.5).⁵² This image takes on special importance in the Psalter as it must double as a picture of the Crucifixion, which figures as the psalter cycle's most notable exclusion. The gesture is, however, neither an omission nor a replacement but rather a fusion of two subjects.⁵³ The Descent as elsewhere encountered is usually a scene of action and physical effort, emphasizing the roles of Joseph and Nicodemus removing the nails and receiving the body. Where Mary is present, she holds one of Christ's hands, while the other is still affixed to the cross, clearly accentuating diagonal and downward movement.⁵⁴ The St Albans scene—with one hand held each by John and Mary, and Joseph placed completely behind Christ's erect body, which thus remains in its familiar position as crucifix—has instead become a symmetrical, static, even ceremonious *display* for the viewer. The overall arrangement, then, reproduces the Crucifixion as it occurred in earlier devotional books, with Mary and John to either side of Christ,⁵⁵ but by superimposing it on the Descent, bestows one of Christ's hands on the adoration of each devotee.

⁵¹ *SAP*, p. 87.

⁵² Mayr-Harting, "Functions," pp. 351–52; also Heslop, "Visual Arts," pp. 168–69.

⁵³ Otto Pächt in *SAP*, p. 70. In *AP*, pp. 72–73, Kidd confirms that the "omission" was planned as such. See also note 49, above.

⁵⁴ *SAP*, pp. 70–71, where the few exceptions are also discussed. Another early example occurs in the so-called Prayer Book of Hildegard of Bingen (ca 1180), reproduced in Hamburger, "Illustrated Prayer Book," p. 151.

⁵⁵ See Carrasco, "Imagery," 73; also Southern, *Middle Ages*, p. 237.

Similarly, Aelred's text insists that his sister can join Mary and John before the crucifix, weep with Mary and even kiss Christ's wounds—if only she awaits the arrival ("Sed adhuc expecta donec") of Joseph of Arimathea to loose the nails.⁵⁶ She should see how Joseph, "in his most happy arms ... embraces that sweet body and clasps it to his breast" saying, "My beloved is a bundle of myrrh for me, he shall rest upon my breast" [Canticles 1:12]. It is for you to follow ... and either hold the feet or support the hands and arms."⁵⁷ The two scenes have become successive and complementary moments in one experience, the Descent, here too, a static moment of embrace and contemplation. The visual artist, however, can go a step further and achieve the illusion of synchronicity realized, with the result that the crucifix becomes available to the viewer's embrace. Performed on the subject *sine qua non* for identification and compassion with Christ's humanity, the transposition of this idea to the visible image makes a radical statement on presence in devotion. Rupert of Deutz affirmed that, alone of all physical images, the crucifix permits a realized *unio* between viewer and viewed.⁵⁸ The St Albans artist has effectively fused the same privilege with the narrative of the Passion.

Finally, though, we should reconsider the beginning, the Annunciation (fig. 4.3). Aelred's treatment of this moment for his female audience operates very much as Rupert's did in his prophetic awakening; it is the beginning of and an invitation to their bodily reading:

First enter the room of blessed Mary and with her study the books⁵⁹ which prophesy the virginal birth and the coming of Christ. Wait there for the arrival of the angel, so that you may see him as he comes in, hear him as he utters his greeting.

She is then to receive Gabriel's greeting, "and so, filled with amazement and rapt out of yourself," to "cry with a loud voice" Gabriel's words, up to *benedicta inter mulieres*. These she is to repeat to herself, to meditate over "what this fullness of grace is in which the whole world shared when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (*Rule*, p. 80). From this intimate participation in Mary's reading, or rather its doubling in the devotee's life, Aelred, the devotee's male onlooker, immerses himself in a meditation over Mary's experience of the conception strongly reminiscent of Rupert's:

O sweet Lady, with what sweetness you were inebriated, with what a fire of love you were inflamed, when you felt in your mind and in your womb the presence of majesty, when he took flesh himself from your flesh and fashioned for himself from your members in which all the fullness of the Godhead might dwell in bodily form. All this was on your account, virgin, so that you might diligently contemplate the Virgin whom you have resolved to imitate and the Virgin's son to whom you are betrothed.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *De insitutione*, 31, p. 671. The continuous flow of the text is somewhat obscured by its modern division into paragraphs and, in the English translation, by the rendering of the words as "But wait yet a while until ..." It is precisely this "while" that Aelred's text elides. Before the crucifix the woman is told to kiss the wounds; for her to do this, Joseph must first arrive.

⁵⁷ *Rule*, 31, p. 91.

⁵⁸ Schmitt, *Corps des images*, pp. 83–84.

⁵⁹ Macpherson's translation, "read," does not fully capture the sense of Aelred's *evolve*, which might also be rendered as "immerse yourself in."

⁶⁰ *Rule*, 31, pp. 80–81.

Aelred's text is in part an exercise in self-indulgence: the male author, ostensibly denied the experience he offers his audience, embraces the same to the extent that, imaginatively, he becomes the woman for whom he writes. Aelred's sister thus takes on for this text the function fulfilled by Rupert's *adulescentula*, that of the female surrogate from whose position the male exegete reads Mary's experience. The gender reversal disarms the taboo that would otherwise have applied to such pure immersion in *historia*.⁶¹ Aelred describes the same scene, with the same focus on Mary's reading act, in his sermons cited earlier in consideration of the "new" Annunciation. But there was nothing in those passages comparable to this immersion in experience, a sort of "real-time" recapitulation of the event. Aelred's female surrogate (or audience) does not need to wonder what it was that Mary was reading—she enters the room and reads together with her; moreover, "all this" occurred so that she might undertake this very reliving of the event, knowing it *corporaliter*, in bodily presence. The result is a succinct statement of the origin, mode, and meaning of Mary's reading as a way of knowing the Word.

As we saw earlier, the St Albans picture is committed to the same idea, and its signal innovations perform just as Aelred's text does to capture the event as a moment in time. Placed before it, the viewer could see herself on the same threshold and enter the same understanding of the event. In Christina's experience of the *conceptio per aurem* on her Christmas Eve birth-bed, we possess, from the same abbey scriptorium, cast in a different genre, the portrayal of a parallel experience as fulfilled in a woman's life.

Placed as gateways to presence directly before their viewer with no textual support, the pictures of the St Albans cycle all but declare themselves "female," an idea their content amply bears out. There is no need and no room here for "spiritual interpretation."⁶² Participation is meaning at its fullest and most complete. The immersion in presence renders Aelred's visualizing text and the Psalter's visual scenes all but equivalent in the way each abandons all need, even all means, to renounce the potential embrace of the image, which becomes an embrace of the body of the Word. Repeatedly within the pictures one can find suggestive parallels to the position of the "servant" in the supper scene, that is, of men who seem to assist secondarily in the woman's embrace or to learn it from her. Where Mary displaces Joseph in the entombment scene, her embrace appears as the real object of attention for her male onlookers (fig. 4.6). In the Descent from the Cross, preceding, the women seem to weep while the men appear to observe their response as if it prompted their own. The prominent position of Mary at the centre of the Ascension and the Pentecost scenes (figs. 4.8 and 4.9) raises this idea to a theological statement: what humanity knows of its saviour comes to us through the body of woman; a similar statement is made with the Magdalene's Annunciation to the Apostles. The Christina initial only restates the same idea within the self-referential visual language of the completed Psalter, translated into the life of the re-embodied bride.

⁶¹ See note 42, above, and Powell, "Media and Presence," 356–57.

⁶² Such was seen as obligatory in men's use of meditation on Christ's life, see Edsall, "Reading"; to my mind, her attempt to elucidate something similar for *De institutione inclusarum* (Edsall, "Reading," pp. 161–66) sooner demonstrates the difference.

The picture cycle, then, was created for a reader-as-woman. That reader, however, need not always, nor even in the first instance, have been a woman. If he was not, then he will have had a woman as reading model in mind; this picture cycle was the means for him to be her, his access to her privilege to the presence of the living Word. It afforded an experience of *historia* that bypassed the reading process of exegesis to proffer a fusion with Christ as the body of humanity, the experience of the reading bride. The key to this fusion is the woman's desire and her acknowledgement of her abject state as body—she is the sinner, the servant, or Gregory's "illiterate," overjoyed to clasp and kiss the feet of her lord and desiring no more. Her reward is an embrace that brings her to the heart of knowing, as is revealed both in Christina's experience of the Christmas Nativity and in the historiated initial in the Psalter.

A Female Gaze and Women's Vision

The *vita* never offers any account of Christina contemplating pictures, whether of scriptural events or other subjects, just as Aelred offers no real pictures for his sister (in fact, he proscribes their presence in her enclosure; see *Rule*, 24, p. 171). The visual language of the Christina initial provides a tenuous link in that it seems to acknowledge a connection between the pictures and Christina's own privilege to the presence of her Lord. There is more to be found, however, in the Psalter, both on the representation of the bride who seeks the embrace of her Lord and on the poetics of the visual. For the first we must only proceed from the last page of the picture cycle to the opening of the *Chanson* that faces it. The nexus for all inquiry into the second is then found at the poem's end, beginning on the two pages that also contain Gregory's apology for pictures and the first picture of the Emmaus sequence (figs. 4.11 and 4.12). As has been amply demonstrated before, the *Chanson* and the Emmaus sequence are made to relate to each other on these two pages, most overtly through their respective statements on vision and knowing.⁶³

On the first folio of the Alexis Quire, the dialectic between male renunciation of the flesh and a female longing for its embrace is made the theme of a striking visual narrative (fig. 4.10). The proemium to the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* (the text begins only on the verso) places a female gaze front and centre, the gaze of Alexis's bride. The contents of this first outer folio were very likely added sometime after the text itself was copied to adapt it to a more specific purpose. Logically speaking, this would occur when the loose quire was bound to other parts, as the outer folios would then be protected from wear.⁶⁴

In the legend of Alexis, a young patrician of Rome, on the night of his wedding, abandons his inheritance and his bride in preference for a pilgrimage to Edessa and a life of chastity and extreme asceticism. After seventeen years he returns, but as a terribly disfigured beggar, who, irony of ironies, lives unrecognized under the staircase of his paternal home for another seventeen years, until he finally dies there. The tripartite miniature on the

⁶³ Powell, "Making the Psalter," pp. 309–13, and Powell, "Media and Presence," pp. 343–45; previously, *SAP*, pp. 78–79 and 138–39; now also Strahuljak, "Alexis Quire," pp. 203 and 209–12.

⁶⁴ Powell, "Blindness and Insight," p. 257; and Gerry, "Psalmist," p. 203; see also the detailed account in Gerry, "Cult and Codex," pp. 72–82.

opening recto of the Alexis Quire, unique in the illustrative tradition of Alexis's life, reshapes this story into one simply of union (marriage) and separation. Seen as the life of Alexis, it recounts only the events (two days) that launch his lifelong path of renunciation. Seen as the life of his bride, however, it tells very nearly the whole story, for she remains the immobile embodiment of her own desire, staring into the void of Alexis's absence, until the poem's conclusion. Whether her gaze is seen as following the departing Alexis or as awaiting his return, it is partially turned out to the "audience." The *sponsa gemebunda*, as the inscription calls her, can on this basis alone be taken as one of the most significant figures portrayed in the codex.⁶⁵ She appears in three-quarter turn twice on one page. Alexis, by contrast, is shown only in profile.

The transition from union to separation shown in the picture is also an invitation to participation. In full, the inscription above the bride reads, "O, sponsa beata semper gemebunda!" (O, blessed bride, ever grieving)—unlike the others to its left and right, this inscription is no mere *titulus*; it rather prescribes the viewer's response.⁶⁶ This viewer of Alexis's life—whether the bride or her double evoked by identification beyond the page—provides a reading model for the entire quire and possibly for the Psalter as a whole. It is a reading model that stands in contrast to the renunciation of the body exemplified in Alexis's life, and it likewise represents a model of vision constructed in opposition to the same renunciation.

Below the picture, a prologue, very likely composed specially for this page, tells us more: the young man commended, or left, his young bride "al spus vif de veritet, ki est un sul faitur e regnet an trinitiet" (to the living bridegroom of truth, who is one sole creator and who reigns in the Trinity). Of Alexis's own trajectory nothing is said. The bride, given no other name here or in the poem, also needs none. She is quite simply the *sponsa derelicta*, that is, every human soul longing for the return of its beloved. The remainder of the prologue then qualifies its audience and aim: "Icesta istorie est amiable grace e suverain cunsolaciun a cascun memorie spiritel, les quels vivent purement sulunc casthetet e dignement sei delitent es goies del ciel & es noces virginels" (This story is a sweet gift of grace and supreme consolation for all those of spiritual disposition who live purely in the chaste life in worthy anticipation of the virginal wedding and its heavenly delights).⁶⁷ The viewer who greets the *sponsa gemebunda* is thus her mirror image in the religious life, the *sponsa Christi*; to this audience the poem offers *suverain cunsolaciun*. As I will argue below, the emergence of Alexis's bride as secondary protagonist and object of identification corresponds to a shift in envisioned audience

⁶⁵ See p. 136 and note 9, above.

⁶⁶ This inscription possibly recalls the viewer's identification with the figure of the bride in a performance; see Geddes, *Book for Christina*, p. 73; also *AP*, p. 175.

⁶⁷ My translation, relying on Mölk, "Bemerkungen," 295. The prologue is a puzzle, as it contains a number of syntactical and morphological errors, see Mölk, "Bemerkungen," 19–20, and Bullington, *Alexis*, pp. 218–19. It appears to be either a topical modification of an earlier prologue, or perhaps a reproduction from memory rather than a written copy (Hunt, "St Alexis," p. 222). See also Tyssens, "Prologue, pp. 1165–77.



Figure 4.10. Proemium to the *Chanson de Saint Alexis*, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 57.

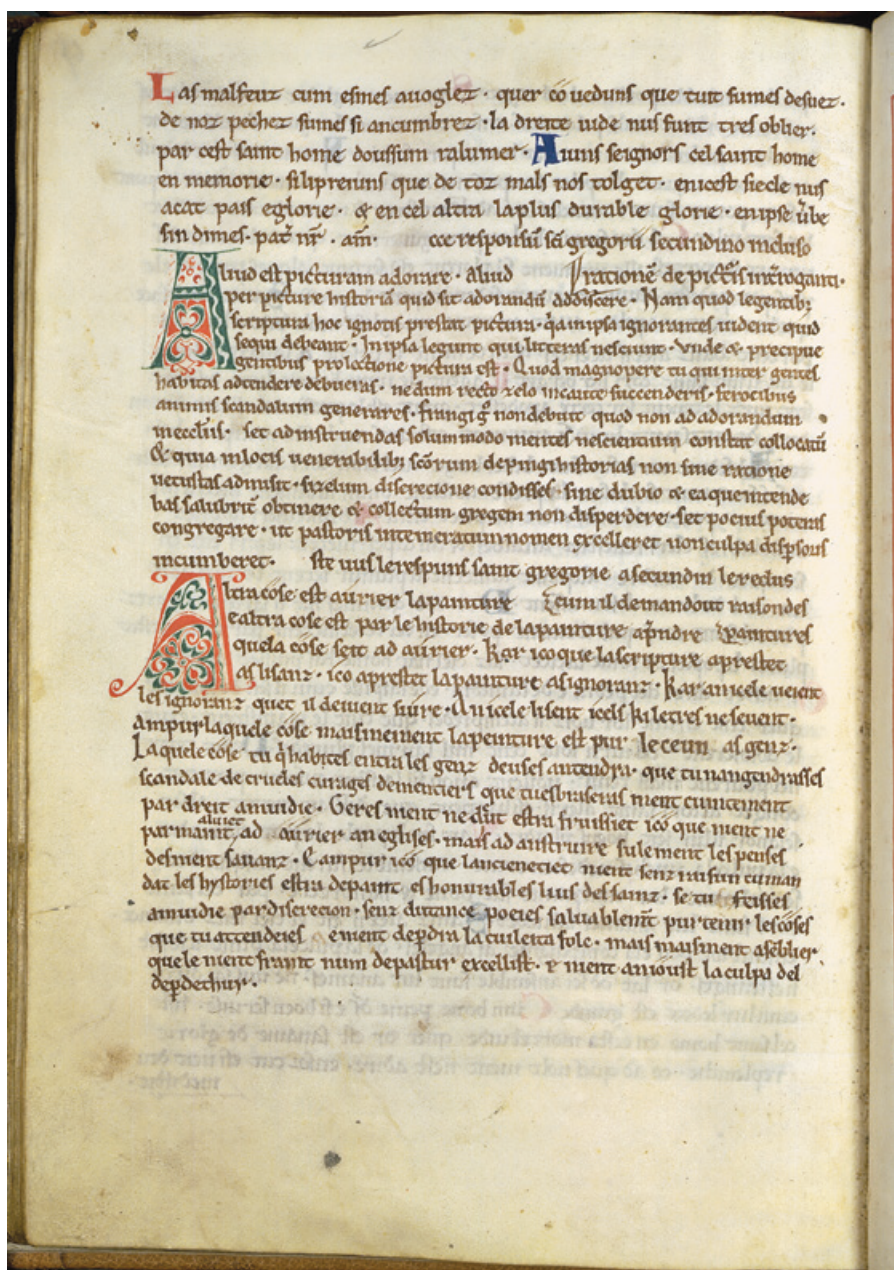


Figure 4.11. The conclusion of the *Alexis* text and an excerpt from Gregory's letter to Serenus of Marseille, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 68.

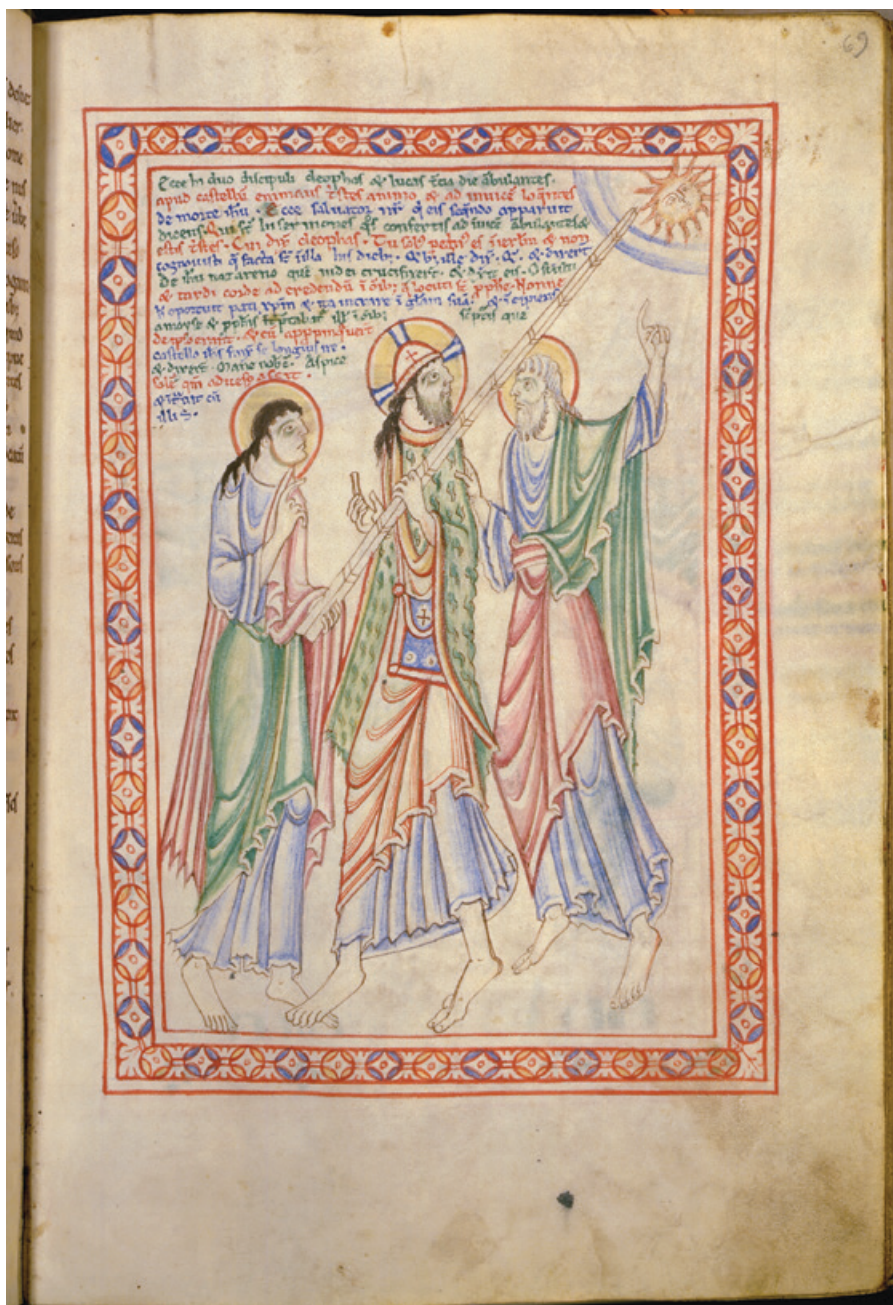




Figure 4.13. The Supper at Emmaus, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 70.

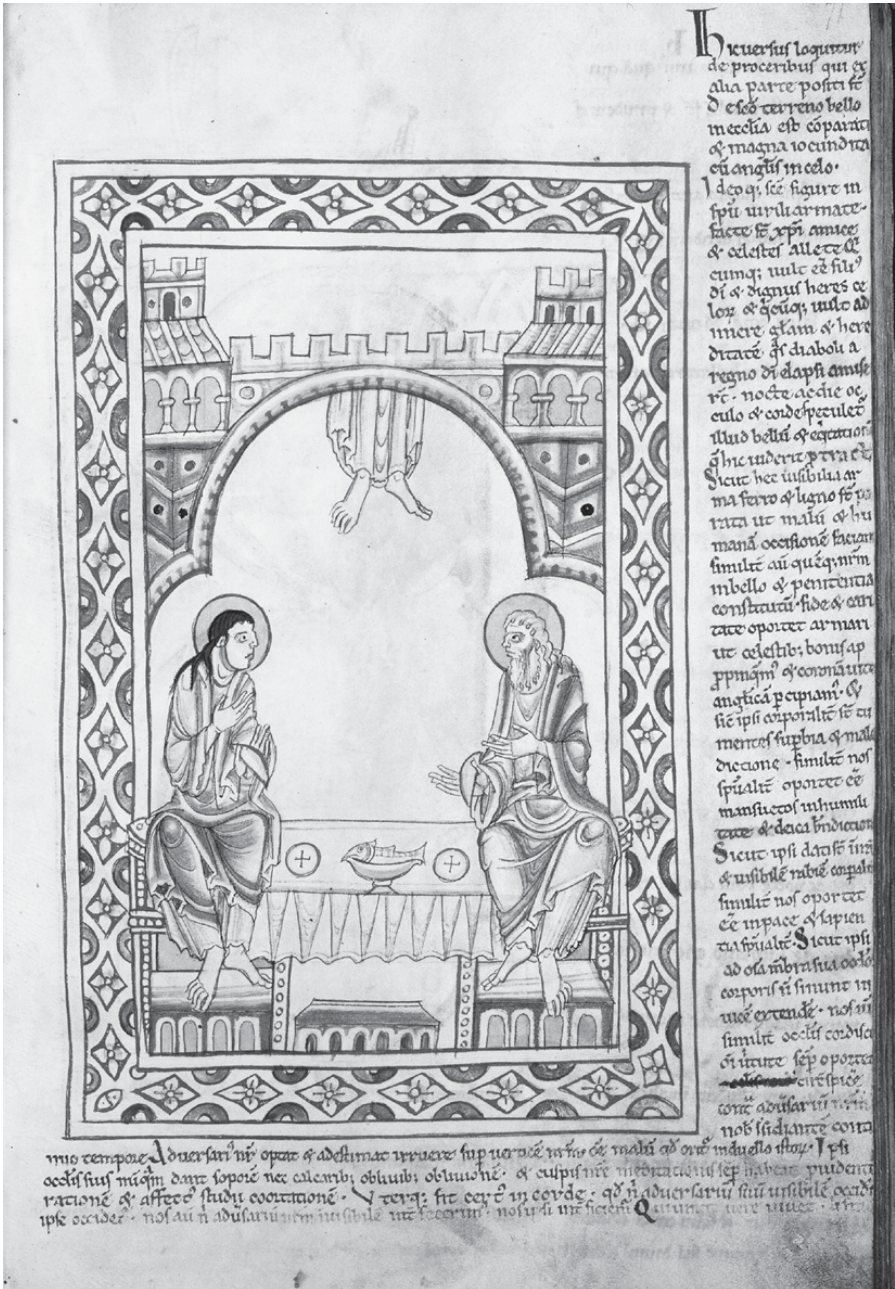


Figure 4.14. The Disappearance at Emmaus, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 71.

response: more than admiration and awe before the sufferings of the spiritual athlete the audience is to feel compassion for his abandoned bride.

To further support its specific understanding of the *Chanson*, the makers of the Alexis Quire offered an epilogue, or rather two: the conclusion of the Alexis itself was possibly reworked and expanded for this manuscript, and it is followed by the tripartite picture story of Christ's appearance at Emmaus (figs. 4.12–4.14). On the double page where the two meet, it seems all the avenues of reflection on media and knowing represented in the Psalter come together (figs. 4.11–4.12). The Alexis Quire as a whole has a unifying theme, found in the opposition between sight and blindness, presence and absence, and the role of body and *visio corporalis*—of which the media on the page form pointed examples—in knowledge of the divine. Gregory's letter, which, sandwiched between the vernacular and the pictorial narratives, speaks of pictures as the vehicles of stories and of what, within these, "should be worshipped" (*per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere*), acts as an invitation to enter into reflection on the relationship between the media on the pages and the message they contain.

The Alexis and the Emmaus sequence are connected on these two pages by a common discourse on blindness and insight.⁶⁸ In the concluding stanza of the Alexis, the people lament their inability to recognize Alexis as a holy man before his death: "how we are blinded! ... Through this man we should receive new light."⁶⁹ This then relates to the Emmaus story, in which Christ is not recognized until he disappears—or so commentary on this relationship has often maintained. In fact, it is only in the St Albans Emmaus sequence that disappearance appears to trigger recognition for the disciples. In the biblical story as in the medieval commentary tradition, recognition was triggered instead when Christ broke the bread at supper.⁷⁰ To effect this shift, the third scene of the St Albans sequence (fig. 4.14) is taken over from a strikingly "visual," Anglo-Saxon portrayal of Christ's Ascension, known as the Disappearing Christ—the same portrayal of the event as is seen in the Psalter's picture cycle (fig. 4.8).⁷¹ The discourse on the visual evoked by the Disappearing Christ also plays a role in the final scene—and the meaning—of the *vita's* account of Emmaus at Markyate.

As we learn in Acts 19, it was the event of the Ascension that first initiated the apostles into Christ's true nature, for until his body was given up, they remained blind to his divinity.⁷² Thus bodily and spiritual vision were mutually exclusive, and the Anglo-Saxon iconography displayed this fact by allowing the viewer to see in the picture exactly what bodily vision could reveal—nothing but the feet of Christ that had not yet disappeared into a cloud, itself situated on the frame of the image (cf. fig. 4.8). The frame defined the boundary between (human) vision and blindness, even as it identified the same with the

68 See note 9, above. In what follows, I am summarizing also from Powell, "Blindness and Insight."

69 *Life of St Alexis*, ed. and trans. Odenkirchen, lines 616–20. Hereafter cited as *LA*.

70 Hall, "Narrative Strategies," 1, 7; also *SAP*, 78–79.

71 Deshman, "Disappearing Christ," 543–45.

72 This paragraph summarizes the argument in Deshman, "Disappearing Christ."

human and divine natures of Christ. The divine was thus unavailable, inapprehensible to corporeal vision, unless simply as cloud. This cloud itself, however, doubly underlined Christ's removal from humanity: not only did it obscure him from view forever, but it was also interpreted as the sign of his sinless flesh. By virtue of the weightlessness of this perfect flesh, Christ was able to rise to Heaven unassisted (as if a cloud). In this way, even his human body marked separation from, rather than community with, mankind.

In the St Albans Emmaus, the same motif is adopted, but the result is a reversal of its message on the visual. In the biblical account, the disciples at Emmaus are not deficient in vision. Instead, it is Christ who chooses to deceive them with his pilgrim disguise (Luke 24:16). Once they demonstrate their charity to a stranger, he reveals himself—only to vanish. Visual recognition is thus not an issue. In the Alexis Quire, however, not merely the picture of the disappearance, but rather the entire sequence is skewed to this new idea. The pictures consistently show the viewer what the disciples cannot see: Christ, whether pilgrim or no. Whether the disciples ever “see” him is, visually at least, left oddly ambiguous, regardless of their charity. In either event, in the second picture (fig. 4.13), Christ displays for “us” the bread of the Eucharist as if to remind the viewer that he is indeed present and visible in the lowliest forms of this world—as a pilgrim, a stranger, or in the fish on the table. In other words, blindness and insight are certainly at issue, but the opposition is now one between inner and outer vision; that is, at issue is the use of bodily vision to see beyond appearances. In this visual discourse, the body reveals even as it conceals, at least to those who can see with the heart.⁷³

This latter vision is not what the internal audience of the Alexis laments as lacking—their self-admonishment disparages human blindness to the spiritual. The discourse on the visual as communicated by the Emmaus sequence is a clue instead to a secondary message within the same story, a message delivered through the *spuse*, Alexis's bride. The same message is delivered, again through contrast with the Disappearing Christ, in the story of Emmaus at Markyate, where it becomes an implicit insistence on “women's vision.”

The *vita's* Emmaus account, as already noted, is an amalgamation of several Gospel scenes used to appropriate it to the life of the reading bride. The casting of the women as Mary and Martha serves not only to identify the story with female roles and desire, however, but also to underscore their recognition of the pilgrim's divinity from the beginning. In his presence, Christina and Margaret are “filled with such spiritual joy” that they feel “they ha[ve] before them an angel rather than a man”; they can scarcely contain their affection for him, and only *virginalis pudor*, their “virginal modesty” prevents them from retaining “their pilgrim” for the night.⁷⁴ This is indeed a feminine twist on the Emmaus story, but not merely for the erotic suggestion: it is most clearly gendered in the fact of the women's surety of the inner truth. Their love of Christ allows them to penetrate the exterior in perception even if it cannot allow action unseemly to that same exterior. In this they are the doubles of the anonymous female sinner of the supper at Simon's house.

⁷³ Powell, “Blindness and Insight,” pp. 268, 272.

⁷⁴ *LCM*, p. 84; cf. *VCM*, 1:78.

This implicit insistence on women's vision is then contrasted with what might be termed men's vision through Christina's experience in her lying-in as she awaits Christ's birth and the pilgrim's return. Once she has "conceived" and knows the Lord will come, she is "rapt to another heaven" where she sees, among the monks at St Albans, Christ seated in majesty as if presiding over the Christmas service. But neither is she seen nor does anyone else see Christ. As I have argued elsewhere, the function of this scene is to contrast a *visio spiritualis* with the women's experience at Markyate.⁷⁵ In the choir of the men's abbey Christ is unapproachable and, for bodily eyes, invisible. As the biographer comments, "whether she saw these things in the body or out of the body ... she never knew."⁷⁶ At Markyate, the women experience Christ's divinity as if through a third mode of vision. It becomes both approachable and tangible but is also obscured and one step removed by his human form. The message of the entire narrative progression thus joins what we found in the Emmaus sequence of the Alexis Quire, and, accordingly, the *vita's* account too restages the Disappearing Christ, alluding to it, however, not so much by ekphrasis as through the ideas it was known to evoke: the poetics of vision and the obscuring cloud.

The pilgrim's Christmas return ends when he vanishes from within the church. In the ensuing comment, the narrator's voice seems to merge with that of the women who witnessed the event. Christ had appeared by night (among the men) in all his glory—that is, such that bodily eyes could not perceive him. During the day, he appeared (to the women) as "that glory appears to us in this present life, since we see it only through a glass, darkly. Hence God is said to inhabit a dark cloud; not because cloud is his habitation, but because his light in its immensity blinds us who are weighed down by the body."⁷⁷ The cloud of divinity is here analogous to an obscuring exterior such as the pilgrim's or to Paul's *speculum*, the preferred instrument of recognition of women and the immature. Both the story of Emmaus at Markyate and the picture sequence in the Alexis Quire, then, offer a subtle but insistent affirmation of a third mode of vision, a vision of the heart's desire that is accessible to those who are dependent on an affective approach to their bridegroom and, no less, on corporeal forms. Successful completion of this bodily vision depends on the corresponding bodily disposition of the viewer. Not everyone sees the immanent truth; in fact, as the Emmaus sequences show, it generally goes unrecognized. Such insight is the privilege of simplicity, of loving humility, even of ignorance. The diaphanous body is made possible by Mary's mediation, by Christina's no less. Their privilege resides in an ability to see with the heart in and through what presents itself to the eyes.

The *vita* makes this privilege evident over and over again in the reliance of Geoffrey, the prelate and schoolman who bustles about in the service of popes and kings, on his

⁷⁵ Powell, "Blindness and Insight," pp. 270–72.

⁷⁶ "Ista tamen sive in corpore sive extra corpus viderit, ... se fatebatur nescire (2 Corinthians 2:13)," *VCM*, 1:200; *LCM*, p. 186. The translation is modified to follow *VCM's* text, which is undoubtedly justified in making emendations to follow 2 Corinthians 12:2–3.

⁷⁷ As translated in Powell, "Blindness and Insight," p. 271; cf. *VCM*, 1:200/02.

beloved *puella's* access to Christ; the same privilege is the subject, from the inverse perspective of Christina's loving humility, of the vision concerning Christ's right hand. The episode immediately precedes the story of Emmaus at Markyate, whereby it acquires a justification in bodily vision that was itself, so we must conclude, constructed on a template derived from pictorial art as that medium's own defence of figural representation. Here the question, for purposes of my argument, of Christina's ownership or use of the codex becomes moot. Far more important is the recognition just stated: each, *vita* and codex alike, is an exploration of the same privileges of the woman-as-reader.

Alexis Recognized

The *vita* shows us the Emmaus story as assimilated to the life of the reading bride. The text of the Old French Alexis and its specific staging in the Alexis Quire do the same with the Alexis story: it becomes one to be read through the position of the abandoned bride, her desire and its trajectory to the heavenly embrace are the audience's own. But still more than this is at stake. In the story of Emmaus at Markyate an opposition between two views of body and gnosis that is implicit in the visual treatment of the narrative is made explicit in the women's own understanding of their and Christina's experience. In the St Albans Alexis this opposition becomes embodied in the two protagonists. Alexis exemplifies a contempt for the body and its attachments that prohibits what the bride must seek: his embrace, or at least, in this life, continuing assurance of his love. Yet she is denied not only this but also any knowledge of his fate and thus any recognition of his holiness. Here, the Emmaus drama of recognition and blindness is played out antagonistically, not merely as a game of disguised identity but as an existential conflict between two different quests for recognition from God.

Visual recognition is made the crux of the story of Alexis in the text preserved in the St Albans Psalter, and in this it is intricately tied to the Emmaus sequence that follows. The lament over blindness and failed recognition recurs four times before the poem's conclusion, figuring above all in the family's original lament over his departure and again as part of both the father's and the mother's *planctus* over Alexis's dead body.⁷⁸ The message is then driven home in the closing verses on blindness and new light that stand opposite the first Emmaus picture.⁷⁹ The body of *l'ume deu* (the man of God), once recognized by the people after death, shows them, visibly, how to lead righteous lives.⁸⁰

Alexis in fact acquires his capacity for illumination solely through his position as *imitator Christi*, or, better, as a visible remanifestation (for the audience) of Christ's suffering.⁸¹ Once he is discovered, we learn of the people of Rome that, "Because of the holy body [of Alexis] that they possess, / It seems to them that they hold God himself."⁸² This despite the

⁷⁸ *Vie de saint Alexis*, ed. Storey; for the original lament see lines 238–40, the parents' *planctus* are at lines 394–95, 434–45, 439. The Old French text is cited from this edition, hereafter VSA.

⁷⁹ Cited above, p. 167; see also Powell, "Media and Presence," 343–44.

⁸⁰ Powell, "Media and Presence," 343–45: SAP, pp. 78–79.

⁸¹ Mölk, "Culte," 533–35; also Bullington, *Alexis*, pp. 201–3, 211.

⁸² LA, lines 538–39.

fact that, as Ulrich Mölk notes, “Saint Alexis ... is not a priest, is an ascetic but not a hermit, converts no one to the faith and performs not a single miracle.”⁸³ His holiness resides entirely in renunciation—of his inheritance, the world, the flesh—manifest in a body so disfigured that not even his mother recognizes the man that was. This “man of God” devoted his life to the pursuit of a weightless body, a purity of the flesh finally reserved solely for the Saviour and the same that enabled his unassisted ascent to the heavens.

Still, the struggle at the centre of the Old French version of the Alexis Quire is not contained in Alexis’s victory over the flesh—this it presents simply as a progressively realized fact. The central problem is the paradox contained in a holiness that appears to glory in its own concealment while nevertheless requiring recognition if its purpose is to be fulfilled. The very revelation of Alexis’s sanctity depends on a contrivance whereby a mysterious voice announces the city’s oddly unmotivated but impending destruction should the *ume deu* in its midst not be discovered. Not to be outdone, Alexis passes from this world rather than suffer this discovery, leaving an account of his life behind. Once he has entirely escaped the flesh, recognition of his person can occur, his *historia* can be acknowledged by the community—but not before.⁸⁴ In this, Alexis’s “disappearance” is again reminiscent of the Disappearing Christ at the Ascension, where divinity was manifest only once the body was removed from human apprehension. But the same point underscores the difference between Alexis’s story and the message contained in the Emmaus pictures on seeing in the body. Whereas there we are taught to see divinity in the material manifestations of this world; here visual recognition and spiritual vision are mutually exclusive, hence the troubling dissonance that arises from the family’s suffering for their own “blindness” and Alexis’s apparent lack of compassion, indeed, his utter indifference to their pain.

The dissonance in question has been the subject of a great deal of discussion on the vernacular Alexis legend, for this version amplifies the mourning laments of mother, father, and bride considerably over the Latin text.⁸⁵ In these laments the theme of blindness is brought to a head. Where modern readers have frequently debated whether this constitutes a moral reproach to Alexis’s indifference or instead points up the family’s failure to merit revelation of his identity, the crucial point is instead that it cannot be otherwise: Alexis flees recognition as he flees the flesh; he cannot be reintegrated into the family home, for this would mean retying the bonds from which he has liberated himself. There is no moral failing at stake but only an aporia between two opposing views of body. While his indifference evinces freedom from the weight of the flesh, it also precludes recognition of his holiness and thus any benefit for the larger community. The conclusion, which contrives to bring about recognition only after his death, makes clear that the problem cannot be resolved in this world.

⁸³ Mölk, “Culte,” 535: “Saint Alexis, qui n’est pas prêtre, qui est ascète sans être ermite, qui ne convertit personne à la foi et qui n’exécute aucun miracle.”

⁸⁴ Alexis’s final flight, to Heaven, is fully analogous to his earlier one from Edessa, provoked by another mysterious voice that announced his holiness (VSA, lines 166–90). In both cases his imperative is to escape recognition as the man of God.

⁸⁵ For an overview, see Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, pp. 79–86, 91–99.

This would likely be the last word on the matter, if the legend had not been reshaped to tell the story of two holy lives rather than one. This development becomes evident already to a degree with the expansion of the Latin legend as performed in the Latin West; it is enhanced considerably in the vernacular *Chanson*, and, as presented in the Alexis Quire, it advances to the position of an *a priori* interpretation of the poem.

The basic structure of the story as we find it in the *Chanson* is a medieval version of the legend, disseminated in the Latin West beginning in the later tenth century.⁸⁶ Older Syriac versions, apparently not unknown in the West in the eleventh century, told a simple story of a saint known only as “the man of God,” who flees from his patrimony *before* being married, never to return. He “is exceptional only in seeking to efface—indeed to erase—his own individuality.”⁸⁷ This story, along with its objective, clearly persists as the trunk of the medieval Latin and vernacular narratives, but scholars have long conjectured that an intermediary Greek “composite” version, now extant only in later copies, made a major structural modification by introducing Alexis’s return to his family home, in this case in Constantinople, and an account of his recognition after death. In this version, Alexis likewise returns to his bride, for the marriage is now completed before his departure, introducing a “double threshold” that effectively combines two structures of hagiographic narrative, the flight from the *domo patris* and the entry into a chaste marriage, into one.⁸⁸ But if his bride therefore acquires a presence in the poem, it is not yet the one we see illustrated in the double threshold on the opening page of the Alexis Quire. There she is seen on the threshold of her own trajectory to blessedness, as *sponsa beata* seemingly the equal of *beatus Alexis*. In the Latin legend her place is merely one alongside Alexis’s parents. Together, the three represent the worldly duties, obligations, and temptations that the saint must overcome to follow Christ in the chaste life.⁸⁹ By the later eleventh century, however, when the Alexis legend first spread across western Europe, the same ascetic ideal was about to run up against a new definition of Christian piety, within which Alexis’s bride represented a latent opportunity for expression.

The vernacular *Chanson* offers a clear indication of this shift when it adds to the legend’s conclusion a final image of Alexis and his bride reunited in Heaven:

Sainz Alexis est el ciel senz dutance,
Ensembl’ ot Deu e la compaignie as angeles,
Od la pulcela dunt se fist si estranges;
Or l’at od sei, ansemble sunt lur anames:
Ne vus sai dirre cum lur ledece est grande.

(VSA, lines 606–10)

(Saint Alexis is in Heaven, without any doubt,

⁸⁶ In this account I follow the summary in Hunt, “Alexis,” pp. 217–21; along with Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, pp. 84–91; and Uitti, *Story*, pp. 27–36. See also Ulrich Mölk, “Alexiusvita,” 293–315.

⁸⁷ Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, p. 87. A text of the Syriac version is reprinted in *LA*, pp. 21–29.

⁸⁸ Gaiffier, “Intactam sponsam relinquens,” 157–95.

⁸⁹ This remains true (*pace* Uitti, *Story*, pp. 37–43) for the Bollandist *vita* thought to lie behind the OF *Chanson*; see Mölk, “Épouse,” p. 164.



Figure 4.15. Proemium to the *Chanson de Saint Alexis*, St Albans Psalter, ca. 1120–ca. 1140. Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, MS St Godehard 1, p. 57 (detail).

This latter is a consequence, in fact, of the new focus of audience identification, now the desire and suffering of Alexis's bride, *the* bride. This figure, the *sponsa gemebunda*, or, in more general terms, the *sponsa Christi* in her "widowed" state as *sponsa derelicta*, is another iteration of Eve on the way to Mary, but in narrative translation the aspiration native to her position becomes a longing for the bridegroom's return and the desire for a renewed embrace. Thus we encounter in the figures of Alexis and his bride once again the opposition between two fundamentally different ideas of the place of the body in the apprehension of the Logos. The difference is more than a contrast, however. It results in a contradiction: whereas Alexis's sanctity remains in the *Chanson* an expression of the complete victory over human and earthly attachments, and consequently an abhorrence

of the flesh, above all his own; a woman who conceives of her fidelity to a conjugal bond as the basis of her love for Christ cannot simultaneously abhor such a bond in its earthly form. The *sponsa Christi* instead longs for the one in place of the other, as its extension into a spiritual realm.

We have encountered this idea repeatedly before. The woman's virginity is not a form, first and foremost, of renunciation, but rather a consequence of her fidelity to a "conjugal" bond. Corollary to this, her fidelity is expressed as the preservation of bodily integrity, witnessed as well in the idea that she preserves her beauty for Christ, rather than denigrating her flesh as Alexis does. Similarly, she seeks her bridegroom in, or within, her bodily role and its affective expression. The absolute precondition then becomes the complete subordination of outer form (body) to inner truth and intention (her one true commitment), for only then can the two remain commensurate. What she invariably seeks, and must seek, is the recognition of her "truth" in the eyes of her beloved, while any gesture of seeking the same is inherently subject to suspicion.⁹⁴

We have only just seen the suffering desire of the *sponsa Christi* vindicated through the descent of her bridegroom in dissimulated form ("dimmed" or obscured by the body) in the *vita's* retelling of the Emmaus story as a triple iteration of arrival and departure. But the same also highlights the difference between Christina and the bride of Alexis. The *vita* actually affirms over and over again how *present* Christ is in his absence, primarily to Christina herself but through her also for others. If the story becomes a romance of the bride forsaken, then only because she is so long tormented for her fidelity at the hands of a world that cannot "see" her husband. For her tormentors, her spouse is decidedly absent, because invisible. The *sponsa Christi* is thus continually caught in a drama of presence and absence in which her own ability to "see" is her only consolation. This vision is also what the pages of the Psalter train and serve. Alexis's bride teaches the same vision in a narrative iteration of the *sponsa derelicta*, but her narrative is not Christina's. The primary differences are two: Alexis never "returns" to his bride, nor does he ever acknowledge the sacrifice her radical fidelity represents. The recognition that occurs on the first page between the viewer and the figure painted there, a woman seemingly confined to a tiny "cell," never occurs within the couple itself. Recognition is once again the central problem, the veritable *crux*, of this text—not in one life, but two, and in the opposition between them.

Where the opening page of the Alexis Quire is constructed to anticipate the poem's final embrace between bride and bridegroom, the same is only implicit in the text of the *Chanson*. It shows us the story of the bride in a progression from newly-wed to abandoned bride to widow (she in effect lives through the three orders, the virgin, the spouse, and the widow, always as a virgin) as one in which she suffers not only for the absence of her beloved but also as the loving mirror of his suffering. This latter image of herself she can, admittedly, only express in retrospect, because it depends on recognition. But it is finally because of the reciprocal nature of her suffering, the expression of

⁹⁴ The sheer difficulty of this position finds no more eloquent witness than Heloise; see Powell, "Listening to Heloise," pp. 255–86.

the woman's perfection, that she can be so surprisingly assumed into Heaven with him at the poem's conclusion.

In the text as in the prologue, it is Alexis who enjoins his newly-wed bride to embrace the heavenly *sponsus*: "Oz mei, pulcele! Celui tien ad espus / Ke nus raens[t] de sun sanc precius" (Hear me, maiden! Take him as your bridegroom / Who redeemed us with his precious blood) (VSA, lines 66–67). Her response, if there is one, must await her final lament over his dead body:

'Or sui jo vedve, sire', dist la pulcela,
'Ja mais ledece n'avrai, quar ne pot estra,
Ne ja mais hume n'avrai, an tute terre.
Deu servirei, le rei ki tot guvernet:
Il nem faldrat, s'il veit que jo lui serve'.
(VSA, lines 491–95)

'Now I am a widow, my lord,' the maiden said,
'I will never have happiness again, for that cannot be,
In the whole wide world I shall never have a man again.
I shall serve God, the king who rules over all.
He will not fail me, if he sees me serving him.'
(LA, lines 491–95)

The resigned dignity of this statement is a reminder *ex post facto* that the bride never questions the idea or fact of her marriage to Alexis; nowhere is there so much as a hint that she desires other than the chaste marriage he offered her.⁹⁵ Discrepancy arises instead over the second threshold—his departure from the *domo patris* and only dissembling return. In her final statement, the widowed bride makes clear that she sees herself as both *uni viro*—that is, faithful to her husband until death—and as *ancilla Dei*: her devotion is both to Alexis *and* to God. The same is implicit earlier, when, on acknowledging Alexis's disappearance, she announces, "Henceforth I shall live in the manner of a turtledove" (LA, line 149). We will have reason to recall this passage shortly.

It is the idea of love of Alexis as service to God that allows the bride's longing and love for her *sponsus* to model the response of the people of Rome, who in turn figure as the model for the poem's more general audience.⁹⁶ The bride's lament begins with the words, "Sire Alexis, tant jurz t'ai desirrét" (My Lord Alexis, I longed for you so many a day) (VSA, line 471). Somewhat surprisingly, a similar formulation is then twice repeated for "La gent de Rome, ki tant l'unt desirrét" (The people of Rome who so much longed for him) (VSA, line 571, s.a. 519). This "longing" of the people for Alexis has no real motivation unless his absence and return are understood to remanifest Christ's own. The (thoroughly unmotivated) threat of the destruction of the city (from which the man

⁹⁵ Gnädinger, *Eremetica*, p. 46; Mölk, "Épouse," p. 168.

⁹⁶ The conclusion of the Latin text does not allow for, still less elicit, identification of the people's devotion with the bride's.

of God is to deliver them), of which they first learn only that same day, hardly allows for a sentiment expressed as the equivalent of the bride's. The people then complete a familiar topos of women's grief in hyperbole by refusing to relinquish the body for burial for seven days, for "It seems to them that they hold God himself" (*LA*, line 539). In other words, the people display the same devotion to the holy man and to God through him that is properly the province of the bride alone; their relationship to the *saint cors* appears as an extension of hers. She is a model or *exemplum* of a perfect Christian life, and one that stands partly in opposition to her husband's own.

The story of Alexis is one of radical separation from the body or at least radical desire for the same; the story of his bride is one of radical fidelity, which, in that she lives in a human and not a spiritual marriage, is a desire for the body's embrace, chaste or otherwise. The tension and even opposition between two models of sanctity appears to be native to the genesis of the vernacular poem: the legend that began as the story of exemplary *imitatio Christi*, understood in the most penitential sense, progressively acquired a secondary model of devotion and sanctity, above all in the vernacular versions. In the *Chanson*, the same tension is not only unresolved but also enhanced.

If the bride's suffering for love reciprocates Alexis's own sacrifice within the capacity proper to her female nature, if the two of them are to remanifest the love between *sponsus* and *sponsa*, then we should expect some acknowledgement on his part of the continuing dignity of their bond, but difference on this point instead becomes a focus of interest at the story's conclusion. Any possibility of reciprocity is prohibited, because flight from recognition is the very objective of Alexis's denial of the flesh; he *cannot* be seen if he is to be holy, whereas the truth his bride seeks and must seek can only be revealed in reciprocal recognition.

This problem is not to be excused or explained away. Alexis's trajectory is launched quite explicitly as a flight from woman as body. The poem reads: "When he sees the bed, and looks at the maiden, he is reminded of his heavenly lord."⁹⁷ Alexis's response is to call upon God to assist in his escape: "'Ah, my God,' he said, 'What heavy sin oppresses me! / If now I do not flee, I greatly fear I shall lose you'" (*LA*, lines 59–60). Some have argued that this implies Alexis wishes to preserve his marriage bond for the pure embrace possible only in Heaven; Alexis himself does not so much as bat an eyelid in this direction.⁹⁸ The passage has even been misread as if Alexis's fear was of losing not God, but his bride.⁹⁹ It is instead simply naked in its aversion to carnal union and the temptations of the flesh;¹⁰⁰ equally clear is that this position is of no possible service to the bride, identified in her person with what is to be fled. When she is received into Alexis's embrace in Heaven, the poem recognizes the necessity of accommodating her path to the same end; it does nothing to accommodate Alexis to the same path. The bride's

97 "Cum veit le lit, esguardat la pulcela; / Dunc li remembret de sun senior celeste," *VSA*, lines 56–57.

98 For the earlier position, see Petit de Julleville, *Histoire*, p. 13; and Uitti, *Story*, pp. 24, 37; *contra* Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, pp. 95–96.

99 Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, p. 94.

100 Sckommodau, "Alexius," 177; see also Burger, "Mariage," pp. 230–34.

lament even includes a veiled reproach to this effect. Read from within the Psalter, the same lines poignantly recall the gaze of the *sponsa gemebunda*: “E tantes feiz pur tei an luinz guardét. / Si revenisses ta spuse conforter, / Pur felunie nient ne pur lastét” (And I searched the horizon for you so many times. If you returned to comfort your bride, it would be no perjury or frailty) (*VSA*, lines 473–75). It is symptomatic and no less unfortunate that this passage has proven such a puzzle.¹⁰¹ Like Alexis’s own confession of terror before the wedding bed, it is one of the rare moments (I count a possible three) when the underlying ideological conflict is actually acknowledged by the protagonists themselves. Notably, the bride evokes their vows, understood as mutual, and chides her husband for shunning her very presence rather than solely the conjugal embrace. The double threshold of chaste marriage and flight from the *domo patris* receives a moment of self-conscious reflection. The bride does not participate in the parents’ lament over blindness, and with these lines she shows why: the problem in her case is not that she could not see but rather that no acknowledging gaze from Alexis ever returned her own.

This is the crucial point, but before we examine it further, a brief glance at the Latin life of Alexis is instructive. The *Acta sanctorum* text, which is thought to represent a common Latin redaction standardized early in the Western tradition, is generally regarded as the best basis for comparison.¹⁰² In this text, the wedding chamber scene displays none of the anxiety that is so apparent in the vernacular version; the entire encounter is devoid of emotion. Alexis simply enters the room, and, because he is “so highly knowledgeable in Christ,” begins to instruct his bride “and to discuss some of the sacraments with her,” whereupon he hands over his ring and sword and departs, with the words, “May the Lord be between us.”¹⁰³ The bride’s presence in no way provokes a flight nor does Alexis deflect her embrace by instead engaging her to her heavenly spouse. Accordingly, in her final lament, the bride makes only a leaden statement of her own position, in which she sees neither future nor hope: “My mirror is shattered and my hope has perished. A sorrow has just now begun which has no end” (*LA*, p. 49). Far from declaring continuing devotion to husband or God, such despair is barely compatible with Christian faith and serves to underline, as do the parents’ laments, how hopelessly bound she remains to the vanities of worldly life in contrast to her husband’s apotheosis. With neither beginning nor end as a *sponsa Christi*, this bride can enter no heavenly embrace; neither does she function, then, as a focus of audience identification or as an alternative to Alexis’s radical renunciation. Yet this portrayal is entirely consistent in itself, and what is more, it is fully consonant with the legend’s model of sanctity as embodied in Alexis.

Not so the bride in the vernacular poem. To return to its moments of acknowledged dissonance: all three turn on vision. Alexis *sees* the bed, *looks at* the bride. In lines 473–75, the bride’s seeking gaze serves as a metonym for her long-suffering desire, the antithesis of

101 See the notes in *VSA*, pp. 117–18; and *LA*, p. 129; also Gaiffier, 158–62; and Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, p. 98n107. The line is found only in the St Albans MS and in MS V, Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, Vaticani latini, 5334.

102 *LA*, p. 34; Uitti, *Story*, pp. 42–43; Hunt, “Alexis,” pp. 218–19; for a close comparison of the relevant passages, see Burger, “Mariage,” pp. 227–30.

103 *LA*, p. 37.

his fear. The third moment we have also already encountered: "I shall serve God, the king who rules over all. He will not forsake me, *if he sees me serving him*" (*LSA*, 494–95, emphasis added). The last two instances are part of one speech, the moment when, in fact, she all but takes over the poem. Without this lament there could be no final embrace, and it merits a closer look. But the central statement is here: God, the true bridegroom, will not fail her, because *he will see her*. The failure in her case resides not in blindness but in a dichotomy arising from opposed conceptions of the body: the one renounces what the other embraces, the one flees while the other does not move, the one seeks transcendence, the other integration. The aporia persists to the very end; if it appears to dissolve, then only because, as with Christ at the Ascension, Alexis can be recognized once his "flesh," his worldly self, becomes cloud.

In this sense the audience experiences the poem as a negotiation between the spiritual aspiration to the divine and the suffering incapacity of a female humanity. The *gent de Rome* and the audience alike are to understand the story of Alexis and his bride as a re-enactment of the *copula sacra*, a narrative understanding of the Song of Songs and Mary's reunion with Christ at the Assumption. In an essay that offered fundamental reflections on the ideas of the holy woman, the vernacular, and history in this period, Karl Uitti argued that such an understanding pertains generally to the early vernacular lives of female saints; moreover, "the woman saint—and we must never forget this—is invariably assimilated to the figure of the bride of Christ."¹⁰⁴ The focus on fidelity as the repository of female holiness is characteristic of the emergence of vernacular hagiography; in fact, the process of vernacularization itself appears to signify a feminine embodiment of scriptural truth "among us," in the world of lay experience. The old Provençale "Song of Saint Fides" completes this idea of re-embodiment twice over: a seemingly unrelated story appended to Fides's song and portraying the persevering fidelity of a noble couple can be seen as an indispensable consequence of the vernacularization of Fides's life. It completes the embodiment of the *copula sacra* on a third level, "where that 'life' is lived, so to speak, by all of us in the world of human history, in the very specificity and reality of the Occitanian 'vernacular' community."¹⁰⁵ Thus, "She is rooted in our own 'vernacularness,' which, in turn, her story does much to define for us. We too are *of her*."¹⁰⁶

This, I believe, is the best explanation for the oddly anonymous position of a figure who nevertheless becomes so pivotal to the poem. Alexis's bride cannot properly be called a saint, but she does allow the story of Alexis to re-manifest the sacred narrative, making it present here and now.¹⁰⁷ The people's impression of embracing the divine in Alexis determines their joyful response over his "return" and also constitutes their recognition of the inner truth through the body. Before God, *la gent* share the bodily weakness that is woman's, and they

¹⁰⁴ Uitti, "Women Saints," p. 249.

¹⁰⁵ Uitti, "Women Saints," p. 259.

¹⁰⁶ Uitti, "Women Saints," p. 260.

¹⁰⁷ This explanation finds unexpected support from historical linguistics, in that the graphy *spuse* (as opposed to *espuse*), unique to the St Albans copy, appears to be a reflex of the Latin *sponsa*, and thus may insist on such as properly the bride's identity; see Sampson, "Reluctant Bride," 137–54.

experience the truth in the same way. When the bride is received into Heaven to embrace her spouse, she thus stands also as a human intermediary between their dependence on the body and the severity of Alexis's self-mortification.¹⁰⁸ In this way, the position of the bride in the poem becomes part of the explanation of how a vernacular narrative found its way into the Psalter: here as in the other "prefatory" additions, the medium itself is part of the message on the place and use of corporeal vision. In the same way, what we see in the staging of the Alexis as it occurs in the Psalter is something very close to the birthplace of identification with the bride as a focus of vernacular narrative poetics. She represents body in a new way of reading that allows our experience and its medium, the vernacular, to contain and reveal divine truth.

Enter the Widowed Bride

To understand fully the significance of this moment we must do as the text does and look with one eye back and another forward. The rapidly spreading popularity of the Alexis legend in the first half of the eleventh century is easily understood when one recalls the penitential severity of the eremitic and apostolic movements that seized the imagination of the time.¹⁰⁹ One of the few sermons on Alexis to survive from the period was written by Peter Damian, whose circle of self-flagellants can be taken as an extreme espousal of the model of holiness Alexis represents.¹¹⁰ I suggested earlier that Alexis is engaged in the attempt to make his flesh weightless, that is, sinless, like Christ's. The motivation for this self-mortification lies in the idea of a distance between Christ and humanity that is unbridgeable, by reason, paradoxically, of the body both share. A body born in sin could never hope to recompense Christ's sacrifice of his sinless flesh, and this led to a terror of the judge who would arrive, as some imagined, in the very image of his suffering.¹¹¹

Alexis's fear of recognition is a fear of the persistence of the sinful flesh with which he was born. There is no other motive for his words, "cum fort pecét m'apresset!" (VSA, line 59) on entering the bridal chamber; the same lapsarian sin is acknowledged by the bride when, in her first response to his departure, she cries, "Pechét le m'at tolut" (Sin has taken him from me) (VSA, line 108).¹¹² It is this fear that leads him progressively to disfigure and flee his own worldly identity; the only solution was to configure oneself in advance to the crucified.¹¹³ As Peter Damian wrote, it is

as if the holy penitent were saying to God, "There is no need, Lord, for you to order your officer to punish me. ... I have laid hands upon myself, I have taken up my own defence, and I have offered myself in place of my sins." ... This is the victim, which is sacrificed

108 Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, p. 112.

109 Mölk, "Culte," 353–55.

110 See Mölk, "Culte," 355; and PL, 144:652–60. Damian extols the saint's heroic feat of conquering his own emotions to the point of indifference to his family's suffering.

111 *JP*, pp. 142–43 and 153.

112 This line, too, has been a point of dispute. Compare the translation in *LA*; Uitti, "Women Saints," p. 251n4; Gaiffier, "Intactam sponsam relinquens," 159; and Burger, "Mariage," p. 233.

113 *JP*, p. 143, paraphrasing Peter Damian.

while still alive, born away by the angels and offered to God; thus the victim of the human body is *invisibly commingled* with that unique sacrifice that was offered on the altar of the cross.¹¹⁴

To enter into the presence of God, “the victim” (for which Damian writes both *hostia* and *victima*) could only hope to have become effectively invisible. Such was the outlook on judgment within a view of the crucified Lord as perfection in the flesh obliterated by human hands. The broader undercurrents of these sentiments played their part in the rise of veneration to Alexis in the West.¹¹⁵

The story of how this view was displaced by another in the transition from the later eleventh to the twelfth century has been told often enough. The two aspects that specifically interest us, however, have only recently moved into the historiographic field of view. The first, which I have evoked before, is a shift in the way identification is configured: for the judge is substituted the man of sorrows, and between him and the penitent devotee a third figure was interposed, Mary. In this constellation Mary was not primarily an intercessor but a model of *human* suffering, that is, a model of response. As *sponsa et mater*, she was likewise not only a bereaved mother but also a widow, the bereaved bride. The second aspect is a profound shift in the nature of identification with these same female roles. The idea that the *sponsa Christi*, once an allegory of the church as a collective, became humanly identifiable and furthermore (sexually) embodied in the lives of women is by now familiar; we have seen it in Hildegard as in Christina and I have only just cited its importance for the advent of vernacular hagiography.¹¹⁶ But only recently have we begun to take note of an equivalent shift in the role of the widow. The conjunction of this figure with that of Mary at the Passion serves to represent and promulgate a new idea of identification with Christ’s suffering, the significance of which is nothing short of epochal.

By the twelfth century, the “three orders” of the married, the widows, and the virgins had served for nearly 800 years to distinguish the differing heavenly rewards—thirty-, sixty-, and a hundred-fold, respectively—for differing ways of life within the church, regardless of sex. As Bernhard Jussen has shown, this hierarchy of remuneration underwent a crucial transformation in the course of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, not such that its categories changed but such that they signified differently: rather than an immutable correspondence between the social stations of the sexual body and heavenly reward, merit came to be defined instead by the truth of inner commitment.¹¹⁷ A “virgin” was no longer merely one who lived under vows of celibacy but rather one who maintained the corresponding degree of inward integrity. All humanity was, metaphorically, a widow—as Augustine had said—but this was no merit in itself; it was rather

114 *Opusculum* 43 (Letter 161), chap. 4, as quoted and trans. in *JP*, p. 103; emphasis added.

115 Mölk, “Culte,” 353–55.

116 Excellent historical overview is found in Bugge, *Virginitas*, pp. 59–110.

117 Jussen, *Witwe*, p. 147; see also pp. 91–92, 140–47 and *passim*.

a way of recognizing the true moral significance of humanity's place in the world and its history.¹¹⁸ Moral progress lay in *knowing* the widow's experience as one's own.

Corresponding to this shift to merit in inner growth or inner truth was another that saw the categories become increasingly literal and gender-bound. Women now themselves embodied the earlier ideas of humanity's relationship to its heavenly exemplar.¹¹⁹ The two shifts, despite the seeming contradiction, are in fact interdependent. As we have seen, woman as body embodied humanity's search for truth in the body; her varying dispositions to body thus emerge as if the biographical manifestations of eternal truths; that is, of the three dispositions of the sexual body: virgin, bride, or widow. Within this equation, however, women, with no possibility finally to overcome the weakness they embodied, were barred from Heaven unless allowed the exemption of inner truth, the recognition of service of the heart, which was, *sui generis*, not manifest as physical struggle or accomplishment.

Jussen identifies the inner life of the widow as the exemplar of penance and contrition; in this her loss and mourning made her the singularly appropriate figure of *ecclesia* on earth.¹²⁰ "Das Heil liegt in der Buße" (Salvation is found in penance), is the formula she represents, and this continuously, despite and beyond the shift just evoked.¹²¹ This idea turns out to be incomplete: the penitent's position assumes a debt that can be repaid in order finally to be found worthy of a renewed embrace, and this is essentially Alexis's endeavour. For the woman, however, there could be no "castration solution," as Heloise passionately argued to Abelard, no weightless flesh such as Alexis is seen to seek but only a path that integrates her experience into the love of God.¹²² Thus, the woman reached Christ by reversing the male's spiritual trajectory, not by reaching beyond herself but by sinking into the truth of her bodily roles as remanifestations of the experience of the *sponsa et mater* and thereby discovering the truth of her unity with the bodily Christ. It is precisely the difference between the two, between the spiritual athlete and the suffering bride, that we see exhibited in the incommensurability of the legend of Alexis with that of his *sponsa beata et gemebunda*. Two different trajectories in the history of Christian devotion are here found collapsed into one narrative. This bride is a preliminary representation of the life of the New Eve and of the new widow.

It was not that the new widow knew no compunction or needed no penance but rather that she discovered a path around and beyond these, a path to surmount the insurmountable, in Mary's role at the Passion.¹²³ Throughout the twelfth century and especially in its later decades, the minimal scriptural account of this role was dramatically

¹¹⁸ See p. 132, above.

¹¹⁹ Jussen, *Witwe*, p. 154; see also Bugge, *Virginitas*, pp. 59–110.

¹²⁰ Jussen, *Witwe*, pp. 35–36.

¹²¹ Jussen, *Witwe*, p. 35.

¹²² See Powell, "Listening to Heloise," pp. 264–67.

¹²³ Jussen acknowledges Mary's place as the widowed bride but is unable to penetrate further the significance of her role: Jussen, *Witwe*, pp. 232–35 and 238–40, esp. 233. Devotion to the Passion receives only peripheral consideration in his investigation, for example, Jussen, *Witwe*, pp. 241–42.

expanded in a number of highly influential texts,¹²⁴ thus giving voice, body and a capital place in scriptural narrative to the *sponsa derelicta*. The more this narrative expansion progressed, the more humanly contemporary—that is, the more like every grieving woman—Mary became. This triple convergence of Mary, the *sponsa derelicta*, and the worldly widow in a new sanctification of human suffering will concern us increasingly in the chapters to come.

Mary's position as mother and widow at the Passion was unique, as she alone could know no penance, did not share in the sin that was repaid but rather knew the full depth of *compassio cordis* felt entirely and selflessly for love alone; that is, simply by remaining true to who she was. As a woman therefore, Mary (thus it would be pronounced more and more forcefully), by suffering with Christ as one flesh, originally and perfectly accomplished a human reciprocation of Christ's inestimable sacrifice where no possibility otherwise existed for satisfactory recompense.¹²⁵ Peter Damian's aspiration was finally no more attainable than was Christ's weightless flesh. The keys to the alternative were two: the widow's virtue, that is, a woman's unfailing fidelity even to the bitterest end (Bernard of Clairvaux would soon imply that Mary's sacrifice was equal or even somehow greater, as the pain she endured in the soul was greater than any suffered in the body),¹²⁶ and a reciprocal gaze.¹²⁷ Christ looked on his bride and mother and knew the full extent of her pain, and if he assented, twelfth-century writers were certain, he also felt and acknowledged her sacrifice. Here was the diametrical opposite of the dilemma experienced by Alexis's bride. As Mary attested in one of the most popular and influential Passion tracts, attributed in the Middle Ages to Bernard and known today by its incipit, "Quis dabit" (ca. 1200): "Ego videns eum et ipse videns me, plus dolebat de me quam de se" (I looking on him and he looking on me, he grieved more for me than for himself).¹²⁸ The idea is well in evidence by the middle of the twelfth century, as attested with remarkable eloquence in a sermon by Odo of Morimund (d. 1161). Odo addresses his audience from within the characteristic configuration, as the spectator to Mary's suffering with the suffering Christ:

Quid putas quod cogitaverit, quam plena singultibus fuerit, cum oculis lacrimosis intueretur oculos liuidos innocentis filii ad se directos? O vere stupendos radios visionis! O sacratissima lumina matris et filii, ad quorum mutuum respectum non immerito solis radius in tenebras conversus est! Quam profunde infixus est radius huius visionis in corde tuo, mater sancta, quo te mundi dominus, iam moriens, intueri dignatus est!¹²⁹

¹²⁴ See above, pp. 64–65 and 65n75.

¹²⁵ *JP*, pp. 143–46.

¹²⁶ *Dominica infra octavam Assumptionis*, par. 14, as cited in Kraß, *Stabat mater*, p. 106. The idea was also voiced by other writers; see *JP*, 304, 425–26.

¹²⁷ Mertens Fleury, "Klagen" pp. 150–52, 160–65, sees the compassionate gaze as communication that succeeds where words, language and the voice itself fail.

¹²⁸ "Quis dabit capite meo," ed. and trans. Bestul, p. 170; translation modified. See also below, p. 331 note 19.

¹²⁹ "Homilia super Stabat iuxta crucem Iesu," lines 72–79.

(What do you think might have gone through her mind when, her throat constricted by inarticulate sobs, with eyes full of tears, she beheld the leaden eyes of her innocent son directed at her? O what a stupendous axis of vision! O most sacred light of mother and son, for the sake of whose reciprocal gaze not without reason the sun's rays converted to darkness! How deeply the axis of this gaze fixed itself in your heart, holy mother, by which you were made worthy to behold the Lord of the world even as he died.)

When their gazes meet at the cross, each acknowledges and understands the other's suffering and God and his widowed mother are one. This was the full meaning of *compassio* as it emerged in the twelfth century.¹³⁰ Alexis's ascetic excellence, grounded in utter indifference to human suffering, itself shuns every gaze; this moment of recognition is his anathema. By contrast, humanity as the widowed bride holds forth her "blackened" body as the very testimony that she is worthy of the embrace communicated in Christ's compassionate gaze.

At St Albans in 1119—by which time a chapel had been consecrated to Alexis, and, it has been conjectured by some, this very poem may have been compiled and sung¹³¹—we are still far from the expression of such a visual epiphany of reciprocal suffering. Mary in her role as humanity *suffering with* Christ was only beginning to come into view, but it is amply anticipated in writings avidly received at St Albans and originating at the same Abbey of Bec where, according to one widely held view, the Old French Alexis itself was first composed.¹³² These are the prayers and meditations of St Anselm (d. 1109), in which, as Thomas Bestul writes, already "the role of Mary is especially crucial: she, in actually witnessing the events, suffered greatly, and Anselm finds in her emotional reaction to the Passion an ideal model of [response]."¹³³ Still, it was Anselm who had pleaded directly to Christ,

I want you, I hope for you, I seek you;
to you my heart has said, seek my face;
your face, Lord, have I sought;
turn not your face from me.
...
my soul is like a widow.
turn your gaze and behold my tears
which I offer to you till you return.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Mertens Fleury, "Klagen," passim; *JP*, pp. 199–200, 232–41, 424–28.

¹³¹ Goldschmidt, *Albanipsalter*, pp. 34–35; now further argued in Gerry, "Alexis Quire," 606 and passim.

¹³² Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature*, pp. 342–43; Cingolani, "Normandia," pp. 281–93. The Alexis Master's team appears to have illustrated a copy of Anselm's *Meditations* at St Albans and copied the same for other houses. As Rodney Thomson concludes, "The abbey seems to have played an important role in popularizing St Anselm's devotional works" (Thomson, *Manuscripts*, p. 41, see also pp. 39–40).

¹³³ Bestul, *Texts*, p. 37; also *JP*, pp. 232–41.

¹³⁴ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 98.

To write these lines Anselm did not need Mary as intermediary; he does, however assume the position of the widowed bride, a soul whose highest, concluding aspiration was one day to hear the words, "Soul, behold your bridegroom."¹³⁵ The aspiration of this devotee was not invisibility, to become the host on the altar, but visual acknowledgement and an embrace. How not to hear, then, in a monastic world that was being reshaped in the image of Anselmian piety, the same plea in the final words that the bride addresses to her now definitively departed bridegroom, *Or sui jo vedve, sire ... ?* Does the bride turn to God because she has recognized the emptiness of her hopes in earthly marriage or rather by way of fully assuming her new role as Alexis's widow? There is a note of opposition, it is true, between her disappointment over the gaze ever-denied by her earthly beloved and her own confidence that God will, in Anselm's words, "turn [his] gaze and behold [her] tears." The conclusion assures us that He did, and this was her *suverain consolacion* as promised the followers of *les noces virginels* in the St Albans prologue. But we can hardly presume to hear in her chiding of Alexis a corresponding rejection of the earthly bridegroom, whom she will shortly embrace in Heaven. This is a vernacular bride; she lives her love in the world and subject to its imperfection, but her conviction is as her nature demands and her story tells; that is, that there is no unbridgeable gap between human experience and the divine embrace. It is the depth of her own commitment, the ability to "sink into" her own earthly role so completely and unquestioningly, that finally forces a fusion of the two experiences, of love human and divine—and in this she joins Mary at the cross. This is a moment we will encounter repeatedly at the centre of an avowedly vernacular poetics of truth in romance narrative. It is to some extent in itself responsible for the possibility of identification between the vernacular and narrative as "bodily media" and women's reading or women's knowing—identifications too easily oversimplified and too often wrongly understood—because, essentially, it redelivers the moment that first enabled Mary to "read."

Anselm does in fact rely on Mary in the same prayer to Christ, and in conjunction with a particular anxiety that he cannot quell: his sense of failure and loss over not having accompanied, in fact reciprocated, Christ's suffering: "Why, o my soul, were you not there / to be pierced by a sword of bitter sorrow / when you could not bear the piercing of the side of your Savior with a lance?"¹³⁶ The question, "Why were you not there," he repeats over and over again as his own way of recapitulating the events of the Passion, but nowhere more tellingly than in these lines, perhaps—at least as seen in retrospect.¹³⁷ They offer one of the earliest known occurrences in which the sword of sorrow, the *gladius doloris*, is referred to as *gladius compassionis*. Simeon had foretold at Christ's birth (Luke 2:35) that a sword would pierce Mary's soul as the complement of Christ's own demise, and from the twelfth century onward the idea that the prophecy

¹³⁵ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 98.

¹³⁶ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 95.

¹³⁷ "Why could you not bear to see the nails? ... Why did you not see the blood? ... Why did you not share the sufferings of the most pure virgin?" *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 95. See also Constable, *Reformation*, p. 203; Bestul, *Texts*, pp. 36–37.

was fulfilled at the cross served to confirm Mary's union, her true oneness in one body, with Christ in his pain; the sword, it would be said, pierced her heart—her soul—even as the lance did his, but *she did not die*.¹³⁸ The reciprocal gaze was thus one with a reciprocal wound, but, like Mary, the emulating Christian was left behind as a “widow” to long for her bridegroom's return.

The focus of Anselm's anxiety in this passage is, however, not the extent of the pain but instead his own absence: how could he claim to suffer with Christ, if he had not seen, had not “been there,” if, still worse, as these lines indicate, he “could not bear” to stand at the cross as Mary had? “What do I know,” he confesses to Mary,

of the flood that drenched your matchless face,
when you beheld your Son, your Lord, and your God,
stretched on the cross without guilt,
when the flesh of your flesh
was cruelly butchered by wicked men?¹³⁹

In his quest to know Mary's tears and, through them, know the reciprocal wound and the reciprocal gaze, Anselm's longing all but fully anticipates that expressed in Odo's sermon, or even, as we shall see in a later chapter, that of the author of the “Quis dabit.” What occurs in this perfect alignment of human suffering in the divine and the human heart is a renewal of the embrace of the Word that Mary experienced in the conception. It is possible because of that conception, because Mary and Christ are one flesh. The continuation of Odo's portrayal of the gaze clarifies the relationship between the two embraces as reciprocal wounding, using Canticles 4:9 in a way characteristic of the twelfth century's understanding of the conception as God's response to a wound of love:

Ecce reddi tibi amoris sagittam, quam a te missam acceperat. Ipse namque dicit ad te: Vulnerasti cor meum, soror mea, sponsa, in uno oculorum tuorum, et in uno crine colli tui. Tu autem nunc dicere potes: Vulnerasti cor meum, fili mi, in visione qua me de cruce respexisti, et in colloquio quod mecum iam moriens habuisti. Et ista fortassis est ille gladius, de quo prophetavit symeon, ad te dicens: Tuam ipsius animam pertransivit gladius.¹⁴⁰

(Even thus he returned your arrow of love, which he had accepted at your hand. And now verily he said to you, “You have wounded my heart, my sister, bride, with one of your eyes and with one lock of hair from your neck” [Canticles 4,9]. And now you can truly say, “You have wounded my heart, my son, in this gaze which you cast upon me from the cross, and in the thoughts you exchanged with me as you died.” And this undoubtedly is that sword of which Simeon foretold, when he said to you, “And a sword will pierce your soul through and through” [Luke 2:35].)

The “arrow of love” Christ had accepted is a wound to his divinity that brings him to assume Mary's human flesh, through which the two experience one pain.¹⁴¹ The promise

138 Kraß, *Stabat mater*, pp. 99–132, and p. 114; also *JP*, p. 199.

139 *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 96. See also *JP*, pp. 191, 235–40.

140 Odo of Morimund, *Homilia*, lines 79–91.

141 See also below, pp. 251–53 and 269–70.

of the Incarnation was that it made God and all humanity share one flesh; hence Mary's *compassio* extended the same possibility to all who followed her. To experience the reciprocal wound was to acknowledge and sustain the body's weakness, which was prerequisite to the reciprocal gaze as recognition of *compassio* achieved. As it was proper to Mary, this conjunction of wounding and recognition, knowing and suffering was proper to the female body, and it is at the root of the role of women's grief in romance poetics.

In lamenting his absence from this possibility, Anselm in effect accuses himself *a priori* of the failing of the men, the disciples who slept as Christ prayed in Gesthemane or fled rather than accompany their lord to Golgotha. This was the key: whether ontologically, that is, by nature, or historically, that is, by experience, the male was denied this privilege of presence, the ability to immerse and lose himself in the fullness of a "historical" moment (that is, of and in *historia*, the letter and the body), which might compensate for his factual absence, which could collapse time and space and allow a true witnessing of the event with all the psycho-emotional terror this would bring. This, so wonderfully and paradoxically, was instead the privilege of weakness, the privilege of the reading bride, accessible to men only through her and above all through her realization in history, Mary.

The shift from awe before and emulation of the spiritual athlete Alexis to empathy and identification with his bride thus effects *in situ* a transformation of audience that corresponds to a devotional transformation of profound proportions. An audience that was doubtless a male monastic elite (at least for the Latin text) becomes identified with women and laymen and in this new *persona* is initiated into a "female" experience of the presence of God in this world. The new audience is in a passive position of suffering and searching, waiting for return and reunion; in short, "she" is a widow. Parallel to this shift is a corresponding alteration of narrative genre, a movement towards a structure of union, separation, and reunion, and either appears to be enhanced with the vernacularization of the legend. The new genre has been called "a hagiographic romance."¹⁴² While this term is appealing as a metaphor for the hybrid quality of the text, to suggest the text truly moves in the direction of later courtly romance as a genre is, I think, mistaken: as I see it, the opposition at stake is not one between *legenda* and romance, but rather between two different monastic models of reading.¹⁴³ The new structure creates a narrative mould in which to accommodate and articulate the suffering of a "female" soul. The bride of Alexis is as Anselm sees himself: no sooner a bride than also a widow, a widow who lives on, nevertheless, in the sole hope of a renewed embrace. Clearly then, this shift does not mean that the text no longer includes its former male, learned and monastic audience. But in substituting the vernacular for the Latin it also displaces the demonstration of ascetic excellence to accommodate identification with human emotional needs and a narrative in which the bride "reads" alongside the bridegroom. The body is introduced into the prospect of a noetic union.

¹⁴² Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, p. 90.

¹⁴³ Cf. Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage*, pp. 87–99.

Just as in Anselm's text, this bride's lament cannot yet fuse with Mary's suffering, the suffering of the woman for whom Jesus was "flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone."¹⁴⁴ But the *spuse* reveals herself in a number of ways as a precursor of telling developments to come. One is her use of the image of the *turtrele*, the turtledove, to declare lifelong fidelity to her absconded bridegroom. The turtledove had been known from bestiary lore since patristic times as the image of unfailing widowed fidelity. Beginning in the early twelfth century (if not before) it became, with the dove (*columba*) and through the images of either in the Song of Songs (Canticles 2:11, 2:14), both a symbol of Mary and the exemplar of devotion to Christ's Passion.¹⁴⁵ The *spuse* refers her fidelity to this model in both the Latin and the Old French texts, but in the latter, the mother joins her with an uncanny anticipation of the identity between Mary, widow, and *compassio* that the image would come to express: "Let us grieve together for the loss of our beloved: you for your husband, I shall do it for my son" (*LA*, 154–55).

By contrast, the *Chanson's* treatment of the mother's mourning of the dead Alexis emphatically illustrates the distance between the understanding of female grief at the century's beginning and end. She runs up in a dishevelled state (*eschevelede*) "as if a woman bereft of her senses" (*cum femme forsenede*), and then falls to the ground in a faint. Then we see her beating her hands together, beating at her chest, tearing at her hair, disfiguring her face, throwing her body about, and, finally, embracing her dead son.¹⁴⁶ The description reads like a catalogue of the most extravagant gestures of medieval women's grief, and they may be noted to purpose: Laudine's grieving psalter-reading was our point of departure, and these gestures will take on a quite different significance when we reconsider her in the final chapter. And once again, a retrospective view from the end of the twelfth century would reveal a number of these gestures—notably the fainting, the beating of the head, chest or neck, and the embrace of the dead beloved—as Mary's own in the *planctus Mariae* and related Passion tracts, where she increasingly becomes the image of the original wellspring of human grief.¹⁴⁷ The mother's grief in the Alexis remains instead a portrayal of worldly loss obscuring spiritual vision. The Pope accordingly calls the family to order once each has had their say: "My lords, ... What is the meaning of these outcries, this sorrow and this clamour? / Although one may grieve, he is, in our need, a joy" (*LA*, lines 502–3). Even the mother's tears—despite those that

144 The transfer of Adam's words on the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:23 to Mary occurs in William of Newburgh's commentary on the Song of Songs (second half of the twelfth century): "Assuredly, the pious mother (*pia mater*) shared all the sufferings of her most sweet son through her maternal affection (*per maternum affectum*). In him she was afflicted with abuses, scourged, spat upon, and crucified for him, because he was bone of her bones, and flesh of her flesh (*os ex ossibus eius et caro ex carne eius*).¹⁴⁵ *Explanatio sacri epithalamii in matrem sponsi* 3 (Canticles 3:6), as cited and translated in *JP*, p. 428.

145 On the dove and widowed fidelity, see Jussen, *Witwe*, pp. 210–42; on the association with Mary and the *sponsa*, see Messelken, "Rabe und Taube," pp. 80, 111, 150–53.

146 I follow the corrections suggested in Zufferey, "Tradition manuscrite," 41–44, to address the textual oddities of this description.

147 An insightful treatment of this complex subject is Schwab, *Sigune, Kriemhilt, Maria*, pp. 97–109.

Anselm evokes in a flood over Mary's face—might still be understood in the Alexis as a mark of excessive worldly attachment.

As Ambrose had pronounced of Mary at the cross, with lapidary certainty and an authority that endured beyond the millennium, "I read that she was standing; I read nothing of weeping."¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, in her own lament, Alexis's bride is never said to weep, and she completes no physical gestures of mourning—this in contrast, once again, to the Latin *vita*.¹⁴⁹ The contrast with the mother, coupled with her distance from later portrayals that would allow the mourning *sponsa Christi* to fuse with the *mater dolorosa*, displays this bride once again on a threshold where these human sentiments remained marginal within Christian devotion but were nonetheless beginning to claim their future place.

Rather than the mother's bitterness, which goes so far as to declare that her son must truly have hated her to be so cruel (*VSA*, lines 433, 446), we find in the bride a resigned, almost wistful reflection that professes profoundly disappointed desire but also enduring love, looks back in sadness but also embraces (as already seen) her new future. In reflecting on Alexis's seventeen years under the stairway she makes no reproach, no lament of blindness, but rather a moving testimony of her ability to see the inner truth:

Se jo't soüsse la jus suz lu degrét
Ou as geüed de lung' afermetét,
Ja tut gent ne m'en soüst turner
Qu'a tei ansemble n'ouüsse conversét:
Si me leüst, si t'ouüsse guardét.

(*VSA*, lines 486–90)

(If I had known that you were there under the stairs,
Where you lay in your long infirmity,
All the world could not have prevented me
From being together with you.
Had it been permitted me, I would have watched over you!)

(*LA*, lines 486–90, translation modified)

Here, if not before, the bride's place as *sponsa Christi* is secured. For her, there would have been no question of restoring Alexis to his rightful place in society, her love is selfless and would have conformed to him as if to the apostolic dictum, *nudus Christum nudum sequi*. But this is likewise the antithesis of the family's idea of recognition: she would have remained devoted to the inner truth—in explicit disregard for worldly judgment—and served, or "looked after," the man in his abject and surely physically abhorrent state.¹⁵⁰ Once again, this devotion, like the bride's profession of undying love, can only be seen

148 'Stantem illam lego, flentem non lego', *De obitu*, par. 39, 1371. See also *JP*, pp. 205–14; and Kraß, *Stabat mater*, p. 109 and passim.

149 The Latin text sees the bride run up in a "tattered garment" and then seized by sobs (*LA*, p. 49).

150 The verb *guarder* carries a double meaning, "to regard, look at," and "to care for."

as fully motivated with reference to the “man of God,” that is, to the holy individual first revealed to her and to the city by Alexis’s *cartre*, which has only just been read. The bride claims, in other words, that she would have “recognized” and embraced her true spouse, or the true Alexis *beatus et electus*, an *alter Christus* (already) in the beggar under the stairs. She does not say so explicitly, but it seems he needed only to reveal his own heart, that is, to cast a loving gaze. How else should we understand, “Si me leüst” (Had it been permitted me)?¹⁵¹

Only with the dignity of this lament and its transformation of the Latin text does one begin to grasp the full depth of voices in opposition that I have argued is nonetheless central to the vernacular poem. As portrayed for us in the St Albans Psalter, the bride is a model of Christian devotion still in progress. From her initial tacit acceptance of the chaste marriage—an acceptance only affirmed in retrospect—she progresses to the position of the *turtrele*, in her case a devotion in lifelong fidelity to an *absent* spouse, and finally to the position of the widowed bride, the *sponsa Christi* who will be embraced only in Heaven.

The fate of this abandoned or widowed bride runs like a red thread through the development of vernacular literature, and, as I will argue, is bound up again and again with the articulation of a vernacular poetics of truth. The same is implicitly elucidated for us in the St Albans Alexis, where the widow’s fate emerges to view as the indispensable resolution of a fundamental opposition, that is, as the focal point of an inverse poetics of body, such that not an ability to renounce, erase or simply cast off the outer shell, but rather an attempt to manifest the truth in the self results in a body that no longer obscures but reveals. This possibility, cast invariably as the privilege of bodily dependency or of a weakness for the flesh, was in fact extremely exacting in its uncompromising abhorrence not of body, but, as we saw in the last chapter, of the discontinuity between semblance and truth.

The Mediatrix and Her Last Gifts

It would distort the preceding argument and overstretch the evidence to make these claims for the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* standing entirely on its own. The real affirmation of the ideas just expressed comes from the poem’s embedding in monastic devotion as embodied in the rest of the Psalter. The two models of vision that—taken over from the Ascension and fundamental to the Psalter’s adaptation of the Emmaus story—connected the latter so pointedly with the Alexis and both with Gregory’s letter are encountered in the Alexis itself as the opposition between a male and a female relationship to the body, virile renunciation and female integration. As the implicit viewer and audience of these reflections, the *sponsa gemebunda* stands for the possibility, indeed the necessity, that human experience can be continuous with the experience of the divine; earthly marriage

¹⁵¹ See the entry for *leisir* in the Anglo-Norman Dictionary, www.anglo-norman.net/cgi-bin/form-s1. Mölk, “Épouse,” 169, proposes reading the line as if the bride suddenly retracts her protest in self-doubt, as in “If I had been capable.” This is neither lexically justified nor logically sustainable in the passage itself. Uitti, *Story*, p. 54, reads “If only she had known he was there.”

becomes a vessel through which to experience love of God—that is, she lends the speculative ideas articulated in the quire their grounding in human *historia* and, most significantly, an affective centre in loving desire. This is the “reader” for whom this media revolution in a binding was undertaken, although we have no more discovered his or her historical identity than we could ever stipulate that only one individual necessarily was intended to use, or ever used, the book.

The entire Alexis Quire is inserted as it stands in the Psalter as if an appendage to the great sequence of visual participation in Christ’s life, what we might imagine as the efforts of Anselm’s “widow-self” to regain presence at the crucial events of *sacra historia*. Aelred’s text for his sister expanded on the same need and projected before her mind’s eye entire scenes into which she could insert herself, thereby dramatically collapsing the same distance that caused Anselm such despairing self-recrimination. Somewhere in between these two the St Albans artists actually dared to embody such verbal stage settings on the pages of a psalter in resplendently material form, as the monumental extension of the same gendered gaze into a veritable personal theatre, a space in which the tension between corporeal and spiritual vision has dissolved into a “physical” encounter with *historia*—just as we saw the same spectacularly played out for us in the Christmas Emmaus experience recounted in Christina’s *vita*. There is no further need in these pictures to overcome the dread felt by Peter Damian before the crucified Christ nor even to weep over the soul’s tardiness or cowardice that kept it from actually accompanying the sufferings of its saviour. Instead, now guided by Mary’s own conception and bearing of the Word, the female gaze could draw into the self those same scenes. The obligation that now fell upon her was to bring forth a mirror of that truth in her own body, to become the loving mirror of Christ’s sufferings in his human form. How better to encapsulate this transition, all these ideas, in one image, than by fusing the Crucifixion with the Descent from the Cross (fig. 4.5) and thereby collapsing not only the otherwise unbridgeable distance between Christ crucified and the devotee but also—impossibly, it should seem—transforming the Crucifixion itself into an embrace, a moment of reciprocal ascent and descent that enabled the agonized gaze to alight on its object in a caress and flowing tears. Do the women weep in this scene? Their gestures certainly seem to imply as much, and in this possibly to differentiate between them and the men. Aelred, in any case, left no doubt on the point:

Draw near to the Cross with the Virgin Mother and the virgin disciple, and look at close quarters upon that face in all its pallor. What then? Will your eyes be dry as you see your most loving Lady in tears? Will you not weep as her soul is pierced by the sword of sorrow?¹⁵²

This woman, whether sister, widow, or *sponsa*, reads to restore an embrace, to regain an experience of voice and body that, on the one hand, is itself a secondary representation, a performance “she” once heard and saw (the liturgy, its dramatic presentation, the *Life* or the life of a saint); and, on the other, an unmediated apprehension of the Logos, a visionary gnosis in which she is witness to the embodied truth. This is the meaning

¹⁵² *Rule*, p. 90.

of the *sponsa derelicta* when understood as a figure of the human dispensation before the divine, a metaphor for the body that once knew, carnally and wholly, its beloved but now is consigned to a life of conjuring that presence from the relics of his passing, the *vestigia* available in this world. As the inscription reads that appears to encapsulate the entire visual narrative on the opening page of the Alexis Quire (fig. 4.10), “Ultima pudice donantur munera sponse anulus et remge verboru[m] finis et ave” (The final gifts are given to the chaste bride: a ring and a sword belt, last words, and hail!). The items consigned by bridegroom to bride, and with them the contents of every page of this expanding image-text corpus, are the *ultima munera*, the gifts the bridegroom has left behind and through which he can be found again. The viewer sees the bride accept these gifts; she sees her alone, watching, waiting; she sees the bridegroom exit and leave—and on the same threshold her own meditation and her own life begins, at the point of separation and promised return. United by this desiring female gaze, the Alexis Quire and the picture cycle become an inseparable pair—not in production, certainly, but in the experience they are designed to serve—the one a multi-medial and still somewhat ambivalent reflection on its way to the monumental expression found in the other. Together, they embody and all but inaugurate the new experience of women’s psalter-reading, or reading as a psalter-literate woman.

What then do we make now of the idea of Christina of Markyate as the sometime owner and user of this book? To the extent that we know this Christina, she is the one who is portrayed in the *vita*, and the woman encountered there is every bit the *mediatrix* anticipated by the pages of the Psalter itself. When the initial to Psalm 105 was supplied with all its visual reminiscence of the display that was already there, the gesture was doubtless intended to mark this very relationship and complete the circle: the embrace mediated over and over again through the pictures and texts in the Psalter between *sponsa Christi* and *sponsus* was now realized visually on the page in its mediary function for the monks of St Albans, who had made the book and written the *vita*. The insertion of the initial adds as if a final affirming seal to the intricate relationship between the woman-as-reader in the codex and the protagonist of the hagiographic text. But the hermeneutic circle of representation remains unbroken: was Christina’s actual use of the book thus commemorated or rather only recognition after the fact of the complementary nature of the two projects in themselves? This is the question we can never answer, and one that we do well to force to the background as long as possible. The same directive applies still more in the following chapters, where the focus turns to cameo insertions such as the Christina initial represents into the narrative body of texts, not as pictures, but no less as reflections of historical women in a poetic mirror.

Having arrived at the end of our consideration of the Psalter, it remains instructive to pull Geoffrey and Christina back into the foreground, that is, to recall their place in a larger historical context. One might consider the surprisingly parallel example of a roughly contemporary body of texts that has fascinated readers for centuries in the belief that it, too, was personal and confessional: the peculiar dossier of correspondence between Peter Abelard and his own beloved *sponsa Christi*, Heloise. Abelard’s penultimate letter, with its portentous title, “On the authority and dignity of the holy order of nuns,” offers concentrated exposition of the same themes as have emerged

from this chapter.¹⁵³ Not only does Abelard begin from the same concern for physical immediacy and a specially favoured bodily closeness to Christ to delineate the privilege of the female religious but his favourite scriptural witnesses to the point are also the women who persevere at the cross when all the apostles have scattered, the women who stand vigil alone at the tomb, and the Annunciation of Mary Magdalene—together no less reminiscent of the St Albans picture cycle than they are of Aelred's meditation for recluses. The women's lesser strength, their more fearful constitutions and their tears are all emphasized as the characteristics that, for the very reason that they highlight women's lesser capacity for such trials, make their fidelity and suffering far more dear in the eyes of Christ.¹⁵⁴ At this juncture then, Abelard pauses to wonder over the nature of this "intrinsic dignity of women," over this "privilege of the weaker sex," *infirmioris sexus praerogativa*, a special favour with God that allowed a woman to consecrate the King of Kings,¹⁵⁵ that made women "the first to see and touch the risen lord," and "set them as if female apostles over the apostles themselves ... such that the apostles had to learn first from the women what they then preached to all the world."¹⁵⁶ Such was the privilege granted her as "humility itself," though she was "invested with no distinction of office but solely with the merit of her devotion."¹⁵⁷

Abelard's first reply to Heloise, concerned more immediately to obtain the nuns' intercession with their heavenly spouse on his own behalf, is a longwinded exposition of the special hearing their prayers find with God, "most especially the prayers of women for such as are dear to them, and those of wives for their husbands."¹⁵⁸ There, too, he cites his scriptural examples of women's steadfastness at Christ's death and their witness to the Resurrection. In fact, as I have argued at length elsewhere, within the monastic context that produced it, the entire correspondence between Abelard and Heloise is best understood as a staging of the narrative of the widowed, or "black bride" as a model for the nuns and as embodied in the experience of Heloise herself.¹⁵⁹ Together with Abelard's own story, the *Historia calamitatum*, and his subsequent insistence on the "castration solution" as his personal victory over the flesh, the dialogue between these two voices offers a surprising parallel to the opposition we have only just observed embedded in the Alexis—even if the protagonists there are allowed only a faint whisper

153 *Epistres*, 7, pp. 107–47.

154 Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, pp. 111–13.

155 "Quae est ista, quaeso, Domini benignitas, aut quae mulierum dignitas ... Quae est ista, obsecro, infirmioris sexus praerogativa, ut summam Christum omnibus Sancti Spiritus ungentis ab ipsa ejus conceptione dilectum, mulier quoque inungeret." Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, p. 109.

156 "... demum ipsum Dominum prime viderunt et tenuerunt. ... Ex quibus colligimus has sanctas mulieres quasi apostolas super apostolos esse constitutas, ... ut per eas apostolicum primum addicerent quod toti mundo postmodum predicarent." Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, p. 114.

157 "Humilis mulier ... hec in Christo sacramenta peragit non prelationis officio, sed devotionis merito." Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, p. 110.

158 "Quantum autem locum apud Deum et sanctos ejus fidelium orationes obtineant, et maxime mulierum pro caris suis et uxorum per viris ..." Abelard, *Epistres*, 7, p. 55.

159 Powell, "Listening to Heloise," pp. 255–86.

when compared to the celebrated drama of the philosopher and his sometime pupil. Thus, the major themes that run through and shape both the portrayal of the relationship between Geoffrey and Christina in the *vita* and the representation of reading in the St Albans Psalter are also those marshalled to define a new female monastic spirituality. The Paraclete was founded in 1129; Abelard's letters of direction and the compilation of the correspondence most likely took place around 1140. The case of Abelard and Heloise is without doubt one grounded in a true effort to establish a woman's monastic community and provide it with a body of texts made necessary, as Heloise is seen to protest in her third letter, because women's needs are in countless ways not those of men. And yet, until recently, these letters were thought of as a scandalous confession of illicit passion behind cloister walls. We would do well, then, while not subordinating our understanding of the St Albans Psalter to a literary creation (the *vita*), to take no less seriously the engagement of women's spirituality and devotional needs that forms at least one side of the representational coin in either case.

Great fascinations feed on real historical presence, but they are not necessarily born of such nor at all limited by historical identities. The fascination with the position of woman as reader is at the centre of nothing less than a revolution in monastic reading practice, where reading is the metaphor for human apprehension of the divine and the objective is finally an alternative bodily gnosis. The first notable breach in the learned wall of exegesis occurred not as the attempt to address the needs of a woman or women, but rather in Rupert's rejection of the *patres* in favour of the reading subject as *auctor*, a new theology of the Word as experience that he articulated as female, occurring in the body, and modelled on Mary's conception and bearing of Christ. Behind Abelard's articulation of a spiritual place for his wife's widowed passion, behind Geoffrey's assiduous efforts and extravagant expense to provide for and sanctify his beloved Christina, behind the intensity and extended eloquence with which Aelred indulges what are supposed his sister's affective needs there stands a man's longing for a closeness to God and an immediacy of experience that the spiritual male could explore only through a female intercessor, a bodily other for whom bodily gnosis was the *cunsolacion* for an otherwise insurmountable incapacity.

Geoffrey's relationship to Christina, not only as it is portrayed in the *vita* but also as it is apparently, one way or the other, incorporated into the Psalter, tells this story in uniquely scintillating fashion. However the two projects began, they end up as complementary commemorations of a woman's privilege to enter the presence of her absent spouse—and to bring this presence into others' lives. The reading practice that the book shaped and served brings about an expansion and materialization of Rupert's exegetical figures as narrative and pictures even as it recalls a layman's fascination with the reading practice of noblewomen and their devotional books. As seen earlier, Malcolm of Scotland's love and admiration for his wife's devotional reading brings him, under her guidance, to learn to read as a woman, keeping "even the nocturnal hours ... with a sighing heart and abundant tears."¹⁶⁰ The lavish codex he commissions for her represents

160 *Vita S. Margaritae*, 2, 330C; see pp. 34–35, above.

his gratitude over this gift. If Geoffrey was indeed the designer of the St Albans Psalter, then he, too, learned to read as a woman, in part through his relationship to Christina, but most of all by intently exploring the possibilities to represent that reading, to shape it as a process and an experience through the varying and increasingly bold implementation of new mediary vehicles for the Logos as presence. As sometime dramaturge whose experience with the staging of the Word as flesh informed much of the staging of this bridal reading, Geoffrey the *magister* and abbot exemplifies perfectly the meeting of the art of the pastor and that of the jongleur, a meeting in which liturgy and prayer make common cause with pictorial narrative and vernacular poetic performance.¹⁶¹ All of this would then occur, however, in the same way it does for Malcolm, because the abbot of St Albans—like many other prominent religious men of his time—was smitten with the spectacle of the psalter-reading woman, the devotion of the forsaken, or widowed bride. This was the twelfth century's reinvention of the woman as reader and sign to be read.

The same movement will recur as a generative motor of romance narrative when Yvain is smitten with the devotional reading of his own *sponsa derelicta*, Laudine. Learning to read as a woman cannot, for Yvain, take the form just postulated for Geoffrey; it operates instead through the form in which the codex's patron offers it to the reading bride, through *historie*, or *aventure*, a narrative structure that will teach Yvain how to love the woman who is the embodiment of human suffering and loss. Only one more step remains to bridge what seems the great gap between the devotional book and the staging of vernacular narrative poetry as we know it: the substitution of audience. The religious woman reverts back to the layman on whose position her reading diorama was based, but she will retain her place in the mirror of the text, both as a model of audience response and as guarantor of an "illiterate's" epiphany.

161 While still a schoolmaster at Dunstable, Geoffrey staged and possibly composed a play of the life of St Catherine, triggering the first extant reference to the performance of a miracle play; see *Gesta abbatum*, p. 73.